LINDA LEE

:: Incorporated ::

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

LINDA LEE
INCORPORATED

A NOVEL

BY

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

AUTHOR OF
ALIAS THE LONE WOLF,
THE LONE WOLF RETURNS, ETC.

GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

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By
Louis Joseph Vance

THE COAST OF COCKAIGNE
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The McCall Company

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To
HARRY PAYNE BURTON
because he made me write it

AUTHOR'S NOTE

There are no portraits of living persons in the following pages.

The incidents related in illustration of present-day methods of motion-picture production are, on the other hand, with one minor exception, drawn from first-hand observation in the California studios.

Under the title of THE COAST OF COCKAIGNE, an abridged version of this story was published serially, during the Winter of 1921-22, in McCall's Magazine.

LOUIS JOSEPH VANCE

Darien, 20 January, 1922.

LINDA LEE INC.

Linda Lee Inc.

I

"MRS. BELLAMY DRUCE! Rather a mouthful, that."

"Is that why you make a face over it?"

"Didn't expect me to relish it, did you, Cinda?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't thinking of you at all, Dobbin, when I took it."

"Meaning, if you had been, you might have thought twice before taking?"

"No fear: I was much too madly in love with Bel."

"Was?"

"Dobbin!"

"Sorry—didn't mean to be impertinent."

"I don't believe you. Still, I'm so fond of you, I'll forgive you—this once."

"Won't have to twice. I only—well, naturally, I wanted to know whether or not it had taken."

"Taken?"

"Your matrimonial inoculation."

"I think one may safely say it has. I've grown so old and wise in marriage, it really seems funny to remember I was ever an innocent."

"Four years——"

"Going on five."

"It's seemed a long time to me, too, Cinda—five years since these eyes were last made glad by the sight of you."

"At least, time hasn't impaired your knack at pretty speeches."

"Nor your power to inspire them."

"I'm not so sure. To myself I seem ever so much older." Lucinda Druce turned full face to the man on her left, anxiety feigned or real puckering the delicately pencilled brows. "Doesn't it show at all, Dobbin, the ruthless march of advancing years?"

The man narrowed critically his eyes and withheld his verdict as if in doubt; but a corner of his mouth was twitching.

"You are lovelier today than ever, lovelier even than the memories of you that have quickened my dreams——"

"All through these years? How sweet—and what utter tosh! You know perfectly well your heart hasn't been true to Poll——"

"Unfortunately, the damn' thing has. Oh, I'm not pretending I didn't do my level best to forget, tried so hard I thought I had won out. But it only needed this meeting tonight to prove that the others were merely anodynes for a pain that rankled on, as mortal hurts do always, 'way down beneath the influence of the opiate."

"Truly, Dobbin, you've lost nothing of your ancient eloquence. That last speech quite carried me back to the days when, more than once, you all but talked me off my feet and into your arms."

"Pity I ever stopped talking."

"I wonder!"

"You wonder——?"

"Whether it's really a pity you never quite succeeded in talking me into believing I loved you enough to marry you, whether we wouldn't all have been happier, you, Bel, and I."

"Then you aren't altogether——"

"Hush! I haven't said so."

"No; but you've had time to find out."

"Perhaps . . . "

"And you know your secrets are safe with me."

"That's why I'm going to say—what I am going to say."

"O Lord! now I shall catch it."

"Don't be afraid, Dobbin, I'm not going to scold. But I know you so well, how direct and persistent you are—yes, and how sincere—it's only fair to tell you, the traditions of our kind to the contrary notwithstanding, I'm still in love with my husband."

For a moment Richard Daubeney was silent, staring at his plate. Then he roused with a light-hearted shrug and smile.

"And that's that!"

Lucinda nodded with amiable emphasis: "That's that."

The black arm of a waiter came between them, and the woman let an abstracted gaze stray idly across the shimmering field of the table, while the man at her side ceased not to remark with glowing appreciation the perfection of her gesture, at once so gracious, spirited, and reserved.

Never one to wear her heart on her sleeve, Lucinda. Look at her now: Who would ever guess she had lived to learn much, to unlearn more, in so brief a term of married life? Surely the sweet lift of her head, the shadowy smile that lurked ever about her lips, the exquisite poise of that consummate body bespoke neither disillusionment nor discontent. And who should say the dream was not a happy one that clouded the accustomed clearness of her eyes?

Unclouded and serene once more, these turned again his way.

"It's like you, Dobbin, to start making love to me all over again, precisely as if my being married meant nothing, in the first minutes of our first meeting in five years, without offering to tell me a single thing about yourself."

"Nothing much to tell. Everybody knows, when you engaged yourself to marry Druce, I rode off to the wars.

Oh, for purely selfish motives! If I'd stayed, I'd have made a stupid exhibition of myself one way or another, taken to drink or something equally idiotic. So vanity prompted me to blaze a trail across the waters for my beloved country to follow when its hour struck."

"And when the war was over, what did you then?"

"Knocked about a bit with some pals I'd picked up."

"We heard you'd taken up ranching in the Argentine, and made a tidy fortune."

"I didn't do badly, that's a fact. But what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

"Please don't look at me as if I knew the answer."

"It's a question we've all got to face, soon or late."

"You forget the life one leads: a studied attempt to forget that such a question ever was asked."

"Find it succeeds?"

"Only part of the time, at best. But is one to understand you lost your soul in the Argentine? It sounds so amusingly immoral."

"At least I realized down there my soul was in a fair way to prove a total loss. We were rather out of the world, you know, away back from anywhere; so I had lots of time to think, and learned I hadn't found what I'd gone to France to seek; that there'd been nothing really elevating or heroic about the war, only sound and fury; in other words that, when all was said and done, you were all that had ever really mattered. So I sold out and shipped for home."

"Hoping to find me unhappy enough with Bel——?"

"That's unworthy of you, Cinda. No: simply to be in the same world with you."

After a little Mrs. Bellamy Druce said severely: "Dobbin, if you keep on that tack, you will make me cross with you; and that wouldn't be nice, when I'm so glad to see you. Let's talk about anything else. How does New York look to an exile of long standing? Much changed?"

"Oh, I don't know. Skirts and morals both a bit higher, jazz a little more so, Prohibition just what one expected, society even more loosely constituted—a vast influx of new people. Time was when it would have seemed odd to see a strange face at one of the Sedley's dinners. But tonight—I don't know half these people. Astonishing lot of pretty girls seem to have sprung up since my time. Who's the raving beauty on Bill Sedley's right?"

"Amelie Severn, Amelie Cleves that was before she married. Surely you remember her."

Daubeney stared in unaffected wonder.

"Good heavens! she was in long dresses when I saw her last."

"Pretty creature, don't you think?"

"Rather. Can't blame the chap next her for his open infatuation."

Laughter thrilled in Lucinda's reply: "Why, don't you recognize him? That's Bel."

As if the diminutive pronounced in the clear accents of his wife had carried through the murmur of talk, Bellamy Druce looked up. Perceiving Lucinda's smile at the end of an aisle of shaded lights, he smiled in turn, but with the muscles of his face alone. And looking from him to the flushed and charming countenance of the young woman on his left, bending low over her plate to hide confusion engendered by Bel's latest audacity, Lucinda thought, with a faint pang, more of impatience than of jealousy: *He's in love again.*

II

WITH a small sigh of animal delight in the caress of fur and the chill, sweet draught from the open window upon her face, as well as in the sense of effortless power animating that luxurious fabric which the gods had so thoughtfully provided for her ease, Lucinda Druce settled back in the town-car, aware yet unmindful of the fluid nocturne of Fifth avenue, a still, black river streaming beneath the car, its banks of soft fire strung with linked globes of milky light, its burnished surface scoured by the fleet gondolas of landsmen, in number beyond counting, skimming, swooping, stopping, shoaling.

Bel had asked to be dropped at the Brook, alleging a rendezvous of one sort or another, safely masculine of course. Beyond reflecting that Bel was in all likelihood lying, Lucinda had paid slight heed to his excuses. It didn't matter whether they were fair or false, so long as he wanted to do whatever it was he wanted to do with the rest of his evening. She had little faith in that theory with which too many are infatuate, on which too many marriages are wrecked, that affection is to be persuaded, that loyalty comes of being made to toe the mark.

Then, too, she was not ill-pleased with having herself all to herself, in this thoughtful mood which had become hers since leaving the Sedleys', not an unhappy mood, but one curiously mused. Besides, Bel had been making too free with the Sedley cellar. Not that she was disposed to hold this a grievance, thoroughgoing mondaine that she was, saturate with the spirit of a day that was learning to look tolerantly upon intemperateness as a fashionable form of protest against Prohibition. No: it wasn't that,

it was the fact, established by long observation, that Bel seldom drank more than he could manage gracefully unless on the verge of some new gallantry. A little wearily, Lucinda wondered why. Bel assuredly didn't need anything to stimulate his enterprise. She fancied it must be that alcohol served as a sort of anæsthetic for his conscience.

She had a smile transiently bitter. Bel's conscience! The most feather-headed, irresponsible of philanderers, the most incorrigible; between whiles the most contrite . . .

That, she supposed, was why she had always found it in her heart to forgive him, why she had never experienced any real pain because of his perennial peccadilloes. He couldn't help himself, it was his nature so to do. And somehow or other she always found him out, the poor boy was singularly unfortunate in his efforts to keep her in the dark, singularly clumsy and sanguine at one and the same time. Or else cynical. Sometimes she was tempted to think Bel didn't care, or thought she oughtn't to. Often his attitude seemed to be posed upon the assumption that everybody was doing it; so why affect a virtuous eccentricity?

On the other hand, his fits of penitence were terribly real, when she caught him misbehaving. Or was that, too, merely part of the game with Bel? Was it just a conventional gambit to make-believe repentance and promise faithfully never, never to be naughty again?

A disquieting question was raised by the circumstance that she seemed to be taking tonight's discovery less to heart than ever before. Somehow it didn't seem to matter so much. Was she growing hardened, then, beginning to care less for Bel than she had always cared? Or was it . . .

Between her dreaming eyes and the silhouetted backs of the footman and chauffeur imagination made a memory momentarily real; she saw, as it were limned darkly

upon the plate-glass partition, the face of Dobbin, Richard Daubeney as that night had reintroduced him: the bold, brown face, lighted by clear eyes and an occasional gleam of teeth, of the adventurer into whom exile had metamorphosed Dobbin. Understanding, self-reliant, dependable: qualities that might have made Dobbin a rival for Bellamy to reckon with had he been able to boast them of old. But in those days he had been no more than ardent and eloquent and dear. He had needed to go away to war to find what he had lacked to make him—well, yes, dangerous. Dangerous, that is, to any but a woman well in love with her husband. . . .

She discovered that the car was already at a standstill. Immersed in reverie, she hadn't noticed the turn off from the Avenue.

As always, her home enfolded her in its comfortable atmosphere of security from every assault of adversity by virtue of the solid wealth upon which it was founded, that formidable whole into which two great fortunes had been fused by her marriage with Bellamy. Neither she nor Bel had ever known one qualm of financial uneasiness, neither by chance conceivable ever would. That irking insecurity which so largely poisons the common lot was something wholly foreign to the ken of the Druces, they must brew their own poisons to take its tonic place. None the less the feeling of her home's stability was precious, Lucinda basked in it like a cat on an accustomed hearth, wanting it she must have felt hopelessly lost and forlorn.

She went slowly up to her rooms. And here, where so large a part of her life was lived, the sense of completely satisfying personal environment was more than ever strong.

Pensively giving herself into the hands of her maid, she stood opposite a long mirror. A shade of concern tinged the regard she bent upon that charming counterfeit, her interest grew meticulous as she observed that

slender and subtly fashioned body emerge from its silken sheaths. Where were the signs of age, of fading charm? What was it Bel saw in other women and failed to see in her? What could they give him that she had not to give? Was her real rival only man's insatiable appetite for some new thing?

She was as vain as any woman, if no more so than the next; and if she failed to perceive flaws, she failed with more excuse than most could claim.

Supple and young and fair, and slighted . . .

Her heart, too, she searched. But there was nothing wanting there that the most exacting husband and lover could require. She had told Dobbin the simple truth: she still loved Bel.

But love and beauty, it seemed, were not enough.

For a long time she lay awake in bed, the book unopened in her hands, again a creature of unthinking gratification in the consciousness of Home.

Dark and still but warm with the life she had breathed into it, monolithic in the mass and firmness of its institution yet a web of her own weaving, it endured about and around her, cradled her, dug its roots deep into earth that it might sustain her, held its head up to the skies that it might shield her from the elements, opposed the thickness of its walls between her and the world of ungenerous passions: her Home, the one thing in her life she could assert she had created.

Twenty-six, mistress of riches she had never needed to compute, safe at anchor in an enviable station, idle but for an ordered round of duties and diversions so stale it was hardly of more mental moment to her than the running of her blood, not yet a mother . . .

At length she opened the book. But its lines of print ran and blended, hypnogogic images, fugitive and fragmentary, formed and faded on the type-dark pages: Dobbin's face again, so changed yet the same, with that look at once disturbing and agreeable of curbed hunger

in the eyes; the face of Amelie Severn, with a stagey effect of shadows cast by table-lights, piquant with mirthful mischief as she looked round, at once challenging and apprehensive of Bel's next essay in amorous impudence; and Bel's face with glimmering eyes and that tensity in the set of the jaw which, in the sight of his wife, had but one meaning . . .

An echoless clap of sound penetrated the walls, the slam of a cab door. Lucinda dropped her book. The front doors crashed resoundingly. She turned out her light and lay listening, watchful.

Beneath the door that communicated with Bel's room a rim of gold shone out. She heard him stumble against a chair and swear at it, turned quietly on her side, away from the door, and composed herself to sleep.

Some minutes after, a yellow light splashed athwart her bed.

"Linda?" Bel's tongue, as thick as she had expected it to be, called again, insistently: "Linda? 'Wake, Linda?"

She made no stir at all, and presently he closed the door and she heard him grumbling, then a click as he switched off his bedside lamp.

Later he began to snore, something he never did unless he had been drinking heavily.

Her drowsy time had passed, not to return. She lay for hours, looking wide-eyed into darkness, thinking.

How had Dobbin known—or guessed—she was unhappy?

She wasn't, she was neither happy nor unhappy, she was just a little lonely . . . wasted . . .

III

BELLAMY DRUCE began the day frugally with grapefruit, the headlines of the *Herald,* and coffee. It is no more than fair to state that he seemed to hold all three in one degree of disfavour. The interest he showed in the other dishes set forth for his sustenance and delectation on the small table in the bow-window of his sitting-room, was limited to a single jaundiced glance at the ensemble.

From the news of the day, too, he turned affronted eyes. Strong daylight on white paper was trying to optic nerves this morning. Over his coffee he lighted a cigarette, but after a few puffs took it from his lips and examined it with louring distrust which suggested the birth of a suspicion that his tobacconist was not a true friend. Hastily putting the thing from him, he shuffled listlessly the dozen or so envelopes on the breakfast table, put these aside in turn, and for a time sat morosely contemplating his joined fingers, trying to recollect something confoundedly elusive. The mental effort contributed nothing toward assuaging a minor but distinct headache, just back of his eyes.

At thirty-five or something less, Bellamy was beginning to notice that even a few drinks tended to play the deuce with one's memory. He liked to boast and believe he never drank to excess, but it was none the less true that, of late, his alcoholic evenings were frequently much of a blur in retrospect.

After a while he unlaced his hands, held them out to the light with fingers spread, and frowned to observe their slight but unmistakable tremor.

In a petulant voice he asked the time of his valet and, learning it, ruefully digested the reflection that he had eight hours more of life to live, if it could fairly be called living, before the hour of the first cocktail.

As a man of strong principles, he made it a rule never to drink before six in the evening.

After another minute of wasted endeavour to put salt on the tail of that tricky memory, he made a disconsolate noise, told his valet to order the car round, and bestirred himself to finish dressing.

Bellamy Druce buttoned himself into his coat before a mirror. Like many men who make no pretensions to deserve the term handsome, he was inordinately finical about his person. His relations with his tailors, boot and shirt-makers, were intimate and marked by conferences as solemn and consequential as those which keep European premiers out of mischief, but no more so. No valet had yet succeeded in earning his confidence in such questions as that of the right shirt for the lounge suit of the day.

But the inspection he gave his attire this morning was perfunctory, his graver concern was with the tone of his complexion and the look of his eyes.

To his relief the one proved to be clear and of good colour, the other betrayed ravages of dissipation only in a hint of heaviness. More than this, the tremor of his hands had in the last few minutes become barely perceptible. Already a strong constitution, hardened by an athletic history and inured to abuse, was beginning to react to restorative measures taken immediately after waking, deep breathing, a steaming hot bath, an icy needle-shower, a rub-down.

Drawing one more long breath, he straightened his shoulders, lifted his chin a trifle, and went to pay his matutinal addresses to Lucinda, hoping she wouldn't notice anything, or, if she did, would be enough of a sportswoman to let it pass without comment.

He found Lucinda seated on a chaise-longue in her

boudoir, running through her morning's mail by way of preparation for the daily half-hour with her secretary which it demanded. Posed with unfailing grace in a négligé scarcely more than a sketch in lace and ribbon, with the light from the windows seemingly drawn to a focus by hair abundant, always rebellious, and the hue of ripe corn-silk, she seemed as pretty, as fair and fragile as a porcelain figurine. Bellamy needed only to see her thus to know a stab of shame and self-reproach.

Why must he be such a fool as ever to let himself be flattered into forgetting sheer perfection was to be found nowhere if not within the walls of his own home?

Bending to kiss his wife, he put that thought behind him. He couldn't afford to dwell upon it. Already he was too far committed in this new affaire to withdraw without losing face. But he would find some way soon to make an end of it (thank God! they all had an end sometime) and this would be the last—"and after this, never again!"

He really meant it this time, he vowed he did . . .

"Rest well, dear? Don't need to ask that, though, only need to look at you. Besides, you know you went to sleep as soon as you got home; you were dead to the world when I came in."

"You didn't stay late at the Brook?"

"As a matter of fact, made excuses to get away early. But you were too quick for me, my dear."

Bellamy sat down on the foot of the chaise-longue and helped himself to one of Lucinda's cigarettes. To his relief, it tasted remarkably like tobacco.

"Never looked sweeter in your life than last night, Linda. I was quite jealous of old Daubeney, monopolizing you . . . "

"You needn't have been, Bel."

"Don't know about that. Dick took it pretty hard when you accepted me, and if I'm any judge now, he's come back only to be hit twice as hard, in the same place, too.

If not, he's got no right to look at you the way he does."

"I don't think you were in a good condition to judge." Bel winced, because he had laid himself open to this, and it could be taken two ways, neither comforting. It was actually a relief to hear Lucinda add: "You seemed to be fairly preoccupied yourself, at the table."

"Oh, bored to tears, assure you. Amelie's a pretty little thing, amiable enough, but nobody to talk to—no conversation whatever."

Lucinda limited comment to a mildly quizzical look. Her maid, having answered the door, was announcing that the car was waiting for Mr. Druce. Bellamy nodded, but seemed in no hurry. What was on his mind?

"Doing anything special today?"

Lucinda shook her head slowly, watching him with a half-smile lambent with lazy intelligence. He felt vaguely uneasy, as who should of a sudden find himself hard by the brink of some abysmal indiscretion.

"Thought we might meet somewhere for luncheon, if you're lunching out."

"I'd love to." Lucinda put out an arm deliciously rounded beneath skin of a texture fairer and finer than any other Bellamy had ever seen, and took a morocco-bound engagement book from her escritoire. "Let me see . . . " She riffled the leaves. "I know I've got some shopping to do——"

"Have you, now!"

"And Mrs. Rossiter Wade's bridge-tea for some charity or other this afternoon, but . . . Oh, yes! I'm having Fanny Lontaine to lunch at the Ritz, with Nelly Guest and Jean Sedley. What a pity. Though nothing can prevent your coming, too, if you like."

A dark suspicion knitted Bellamy's eyebrows. "Some actress? Sounds like it."

"Fanny Lontaine?" Needless to ask which he meant, the other women were fixtures of their immediate circle.

Lucinda laughed. "Nothing of the sort. Fanny was at school with me—Frances Worth——"

"Chicago people?" Bellamy put in with symptoms of approval. "Not a bad lot. Old man Worth—'Terror of the Wheat Pit', they called him—died not long ago in the odour of iniquity, leaving eighty millions or so. Your little schoolmate ought to be fairly well-fixed."

"I don't know, I'm sure. I believe it's something to do with the will that brought them over. Fanny's father disliked Harry Lontaine, so Fanny had to run away to marry him and was duly excommunicated by the family. She's lived in England ever since; her husband's an Englishman."

"I see: another of your charity cases."

"Hardly. They're stopping at the Ritz, that's where I met Fanny the other day."

"Anybody can stop there, but not everybody can get away."

"Does it matter?"

"It's only I don't like seeing you made use of, Linda. Your name makes you fair game for every climber and fortune-hunter who can claim or scrape acquaintance with you."

"But my friends——"

"Oh, you're forever being too friendly with stray cats. Why did you ask Nelly and Jean to meet this woman if it wasn't in the hope they'd take her up, too?"

Lucinda shrugged. "Come to my luncheon and see for yourself. Not that I think you'd care for Fanny, though she is pretty to death."

"Why not, if you like her so much?"

"She's not at all the type you seem to find most attractive. Why is it, I've often wondered, the women you lose your head about are almost always a bit—well——!"

Bellamy flushed sullenly. It was one of his crosses that he seemed never to have the right answer ready for Lucinda when she took that line. After all, there is only

one salvation for a man married to a woman cleverer than himself: to do no wrong.

"Oh, if you're going to rake up ancient history——!"

But Lucinda pursued pensively, as if she hadn't heard: "I presume you've got to run after that sort, Bel, because they don't know you as well as I do—can't."

Even a slow man may have wit enough not to try to answer the unanswerable. Bellamy got stiffly to his feet.

"I'll drop in at the Ritz if I can make it."

"Do, dear . . . And Bel!" Lucinda rose impulsively and ran to him. "I'm sorry, Bel, I was so catty just now. Only, you know, there are some things one can't help feeling keenly. Dear!"

She clung to him, lifting to his lips a face tempting beyond all telling. Insensibly his temper yielded, and catching her to him, he kissed her with a warmth that had long been missing in his caresses.

"Linda: you're a witch!"

"I wish I were . . . enough of a witch, at least, to make you realize nobody cares for you as I do, nor ever will. Bel: don't go yet. There's something I want to ask you . . . ."

"Yes?" He held her close, smiling down magnanimously at that pretty, intent face. As long as she loved him so, couldn't do without him, all was well, he could do pretty much as he liked—within reasonable limits, of course, bounds dictated by ordinary discretion. "What's on the busy mind?"

"I've been wondering if we couldn't go away together somewhere this Winter." Lucinda divined hostility in the tensing of the arm round her waist. "We're not really happy here, dearest——"

"But you were in Europe all Summer."

"Not with you, except for a few weeks. You took me over but left me to come back to business affairs that could have got along perfectly without you. And while you were with me, what was different from our life here?

Nothing but the geography of our environment. Meeting the same people, doing the same things, living in the self-same groove abroad as at home—that sort of thing's no good for us, Bel."

"What's wrong with the way we live?"

"Its desperate sameness wears on us till we turn for distraction to foolish things, things we wouldn't dream of doing if we weren't bored. Look through my calendar there; you'll find I'm booked up for weeks ahead, and week in and week out the same old round. And so with you. Consciously or unconsciously you resent it, dear, you're driven to look for something different, some excitement to lift you out of the deadly rut. As for me . . . Would you like it if I took a lover simply because I was bored silly, too?"

"Linda!"

"But don't you see that's what we're coming to, that is how it's bound to end with us if we go on this way, all the time drifting a little farther apart? Why can't we run away from it all for a while, you and I, forget it, and find ourselves again? Take me to Egypt, India, any place where we won't see the same people all the time and do the same things every day. I feel as if I'd lost you already——"

"What nonsense!"

"Oh, perhaps not altogether yet. But slowly and surely I am losing you. Bel: I want my husband and—he needs me. Give me a chance to find him again and prove to him I'm something better than—than a boutonnière to a man of fashion."

"Boutonnière?"

"A neglected wife, the finishing touch."

Bellamy laughed outright, and Lucinda's earnestness melted into an answering smile. "What a notion! How did you get it, Linda?"

"Thought it up all out of my own head, strange as it may appear. You see—this is the danger of it all—you

make me think, dear. And if you keep that up, first thing you know I'll be all mental—and that would be too awful!"

Bel laughed again, more briefly, and slackened his embrace; and she understood from this that, if she had not actually lost, she had gained nothing.

"Perhaps you're right. At all events, it's worth thinking about."

"You will think it over, Bel—promise?"

"Word of honour. But now—late for an appointment—must run."

Against the better counsel of her instinct, Lucinda put all she had left unsaid into her parting kiss—and felt that his response was forced.

In chagrin she wandered to a window and stood gazing blankly out till recalled by a new voice: "Good morning, Mrs. Druce."

Lucinda wadded the handkerchief into her palm and turned to her secretary, an unruffled countenance.

"Good morning, Elena."

Elena Fiske was conscientiously unalluring in the livery affected by intellect in reduced circumstances. Thanks to a cultivated contempt for powder, her good features wore an honest polish. She walked with a stride and looked you in the eye. Erroneously she conceived her opinion of Lucinda to be privately entertained.

"If you're ready for me," she suggested with perfect poise.

"Yes, quite ready."

Elena consulted a sensible note-book. "I was to remind you to telephone Mrs. Rossiter Wade."

"Oh, yes."

Lucinda took up the telephone but only to find the wire already in use; that is to say, somebody in another part of the house was talking without having thought to disconnect the boudoir extension. Recognizing Bel's voice,

she would have hung up at once had she not overheard a name.

"Lucky to catch you in, Amelie," Bellamy was saying in the blandishing accents she knew too well. "About our luncheon, you know——"

"See here, Bel: you're not going to put me off at the last minute!"

"Rather not! But for reasons which I confidently leave to your imagination, it might be better to make it any place but the Ritz. What do you say to the Clique? It's at least discreet——"

"But Bel!" the mocking voice of Amelie Severn put in——"we settled on the Clique instead of the Ritz last night, just before you went home. What's happened to the old memory?"

Bellamy was still stammering sheepishly when Lucinda cut off.

IV

FROST in the air of that early Winter day lent its sunlight the cold brilliance of diamond-dust. The sky was turquoise glaze, more green than blue, incredibly hard, shining, high and resonant. Though the new year was well launched, snow had not yet fallen, no dismal sierras of mud, slush and rubbish disfigured the city streets and hindered their swift business. But on Fifth avenue, by that mid-morning hour, the crush of motor-cars had grown so dense that one could hardly hope to drive from the Plaza to Thirty-fourth street in less than thirty minutes.

Bellamy, nursing a mood blackly malcontent, fumed over every halt dictated by the winking semaphore lights of the traffic towers. He could have made far better time afoot, and would infinitely have preferred the exercise—indeed, felt need of it. But in his understanding it was essential that the car should set him down in front of the sedate pressed-brick structure on East Thirtieth street whose entrance was flanked by an ever-stainless plate of brass advertising in dignified black letters OFFICES OF THE DRUCE ESTATE—necessary for the planting of what he was pleased to term his "alibi." It made his mind easier to know he could prove by the chauffeur that he had "gone to business." What he did with himself after passing through those austere portals the chauffeur couldn't know, couldn't be expected to know, consequently couldn't tell.

It was true, Lucinda had never deigned to question a servant about his comings and goings, he had no reason to believe she would ever be so far forgetful of her dignity. Still, if one will flirt with fire, the first rule is to take out insurance.

Notwithstanding the numerous occasions when his own laches and errors of judgment had betrayed Bellamy, his life of a licensed philanderer (so he rated himself) remained one endless intrigue of evasion, a matted tangle of lies, equivocations, shifts and stratagems, to keep account of which was not only a matter of life and death with him but a task to tax the wits of any man. The wonder was less that feet which trod such treacherous ground were known to slip, than that they slipped so seldom.

Merely to admit the need for all this involution of ambiguity and double-dealing grievously affronted self-esteem. Deceit was strangely distasteful to this man who was forever floundering in a muck of it, a quagmire from whose grim suck his feet were never wholly free. In saner interludes, times of disillusion and clear inner vision such as this, he loathed it all, himself most of all. Naturally fastidious, he felt himself defiled, much as if he were constrained continually to dabble those well-manicured hands in a kennel. He would have given half of all he possessed to be free of this feeling of personal dishonor which was the fruit of self-indulgence. A quaint contradiction was to be read in the fact that he knew no way to satisfy his vanity but at the cost of giving his vanity offence.

Today found Bellamy more out of humour with himself than ever before, more disposed to consider turning over a new leaf, a project often mooted by his conscience (always when he was falling out of love) often approved but never seriously tackled.

Now, however, he had every incentive: self-esteem sick to death in sequence to last night's dissipation, anxiety to reanimate it with a noble gesture; mortification due to that lapse of memory which had laid him open to Amelie's derision, accompanied by reluctance to see the lady soon again; most of all, Lucinda's unmistakable appeal to his senses and sensibilities both, in their interview just ended.

There was no one like Linda, not a woman in New York who could hold a candle to her for looks, wit and intelligence, none other whom he could trust, no one who loved him so well. And it would be such a simple matter to do as she suggested, humour her, make her happy—clear out of New York and not return till time had wiped the slate clean of his score, then settle down to behave, and incidentally to respect, himself.

Where was the sense in holding on this tack, ignoring Linda, making her miserable, storing up sure retribution, and meantime playing the silly goat, all for the sake of a few hours of facile excitement? It wasn't as if he couldn't help himself, as if his fatal beauty rendered it impossible for women to resist him. No: the women he flirted with were as ready to flirt with any other man who has as much to offer them . . .

Why, then go on?

Bellamy assured himself he was damn' sorry that he hadn't, while calling Amelie up from the library, obeyed his first impulse and broken off the appointment altogether. Chances were her resentment would have resulted in a permanent breach. In which event all hands would have been happier. While if he went on now to meet her at this shady Clique Club, the end might easily be, what the outcome of persistence in his present courses must surely be, heartbreak, unhappiness, the slime of the divorce courts.

Thrice in the course of the scant hour he spent at his desk Bellamy put out a hand to the telephone, meaning to call up Amelie and call it off; and thrice withheld his hand, partly because he hated the thought of a wrangle over the wire, partly because he was afraid the girl at the switchboard might listen in.

In the end he left his office half an hour earlier than he need have, and telephoned the Severn apartment from the Waldorf, only to learn from her maid that Mrs. Severn was not at home.

Divided between relief and annoyance, he took a taxi to the Clique, arriving twenty minutes before the time appointed, and Heaven alone knew how long before he might expect Amelie. For Amelie was one of those who, having no personality of their own worth mentioning, build themselves one of appropriated tricks and traits, as a rule those which are least considerate of the comfort of others. Amelie believed a certain distinction inhered in being always late for an appointment.

Now Bellamy detested waiting, especially in a public place, and never more than in the little foyer of the Clique, with its suggestively discreet lighting; the last place where one cared to be hung up on exhibition.

The Clique Club was a post-Prohibition institution of New York, run in direct, more or less open, and famously successful defiance of the Eighteenth Amendment. One had to become a member in order to obtain admission, or else be introduced as the guest of a member; and the initiation fee was something wholly dependent on one's rating in the esteem of the Membership Committee, whose powers had been delegated en bloc to an urbane brigand, the club steward, Theodore by name: in more humid days the more than ordinarily supercilious, courted and successful maître-d'hotel of a fashionable restaurant. Once a member and within those unhallowed precincts, "everything went," in the parlance of its frequenters, "you could get away with murder." There was a floor for dancing, with the inevitable jazz band, rather a good one. Rooms were provided for private dinner parties of every size, however small. In the restaurant proper an improper degree of privacy was obtainable at will simply by drawing the curtains of the booths in which the tables were individually set apart. The cooking was atrocious, the wines and liquors only tolerable, the tariffs cynical.

Amelie Severn kept Bellamy kicking his heels a bad quarter of an hour longer than she need have; and those fifteen minutes, added to the twenty which he had in-

flicted upon himself, served to draw his temper fine. Nothing of this, however, was apparent in his reception of her, in fact much of it was obscured for the first few minutes by the admiration which her undeniable good looks could hardly have failed to excite. There was, after all, a measure of compensation in the knowledge that one had made a conquest of so rare a creature.

It didn't count that there had been more truth than good faith in Bellamy's statement to his wife that Amelie was "amiable enough, but nobody to talk to." Good humour, easy spirits, grace of manner and charm of person will carry even a dull woman far. Amelie was neither stupid nor witty; she was shrewd. Mainly through instinct but in part through education she was shrewd, she knew what she wanted, which was every luxury, and how to go about obtaining it, which was simple; all one needed to do was to fix on some tedious man to flatter with one's attentions. For the more dull the man, the better the dividends returned by such inexpensive investments; the more keen-witted, the more disposed to count the cost.

If there was nothing subtle in the philosophy of Amelie, it boasted this rare virtue, it was practical and practicable in the extreme; just as it is practised to an extent few men dream of.

To women of this type love is the poppy of hallucination, calling for ruthless extermination if found in one's own garden, but sure to produce goodly crops if cultivated by fair, skilled hands in the fields of the neighbouring sex.

Amelie had married Ross Severn because he was well-to-do, uninteresting, middle-aged, of good family; and had quickly repented because he spoiled her and showed no intention of ceasing to be a good insurance risk. So she craved much exciting indiscretions as this assignation with another's husband at the Clique Club of questionable repute.

She frankly owned as much while Bellamy was help-

ing her with her wrap in the semi-seclusion of their as yet uncurtained booth.

"—Thrilled to a jellybean!" she declared, employing an absurdity which she had promptly pirated upon hearing the laugh that rewarded its use by another woman. "Thanks, old dear." She shrugged out of her furs, planted elbows upon the table, cradled her chin upon the backs of engaged fingers, and peered about the room with quick, inquisitive, bird-like glances. "Ross would be furious."

"Hope so. If he weren't, he ought to be spoken to about it. Or don't you think he has any right to object to your doing as you please?"

"Oh, why worry about Ross's rights? He's just a husband."

"And husbands haven't any rights worth considering. Quite so! All the same, sometimes they assert 'em."

"I'd like to see Ross . . . " A laugh of lazy insolence rounded off Amelie's thought. "Besides, I'm not doing anything wrong . . . "

"Not yet," Bellamy admitted equably. He nodded to their hovering waiter. "What kind of cocktail, Amelie? Everything else is ordered."

"Thank goodness: I'm famished. A T-N-T, please.

The waiter noted down this frightful prescription with entire equanimity, but lingered. "And monsieur——?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Nothing, monsieur?" Professional poise was sadly shattered for an instant. Why should one punish oneself with the cuisine of the Clique and reject the solitary compensation the establishment had to offer? Ejaculating "Nothing!" once more, in a tone of profound perturbation, the waiter retired.

Bellamy tried to cover his annoyance with a laugh, but surprised a look of dark resentment in Amelie's eyes and opened his own. "Hello?"

"Why did you do that? Simply to mortify me?"

"Afraid I don't follow——"

"Do you want the waiters to think you bring me here solely to satisfy *my* appetite for liquor? It isn't as if you were a plaster saint in that line yourself—not exactly."

"Sorry, Amy. Make it a rule never to drink before evening."

"Then why come here at all?"

"Thought we'd agreed a little everyday discretion wouldn't do us any harm."

"What are you afraid of? Your wife?"

Bellamy answered only with a fatigued look. The cocktail was being served.

"And the melon, monsieur—shall I bring it at once?"

"Please."

The tone was crisp if the word was civil. Amelie sipped her mixed poisons, mysterious malice informing the eyes that watched Bellamy over the rim of the glass.

"Why take it out on the waiter if you're in a temper with me?"

"I'm not, Amy, I—" Bellamy caught himself, and permitted impatience to find an outlet in a sound of polite expostulation: "Really!"

Amelie put aside an empty glass. Refreshed and fortified, she brooded with sultry eyes while wedges of under-ripe casaba bedded in cracked ice were set before them.

"You know, Bel," she observed in the dispassionate accents of the friend who wouldn't for worlds mention it, only it's for your own good—"you really ought to be more careful about your drinking. You barely escaped being pretty awful at times, last night."

An indictment the more unkind because a cloudy memory refused to affirm or deny its justice. Bellamy began to repent his fidelity to the six o'clock rule.

"Fancy your forgetting we'd agreed to meet here instead of at the Ritz. That ought to show you how lit you were."

"Sorry——"

"That's all very well: but suppose you hadn't had sense enough to call up this morning, suppose I had come here to meet you, just as we'd arranged, and had to go home after waiting around for hours like some shop-girl forgotten on a street corner——"

"Poetic justice, if you ask me—something to offset some of the hours you've kept me fidgeting, wondering if you meant to show up at all."

Injudiciously, Bellamy added a smile to the retort, by way of offsetting its justice.

"So it amuses you to think of making an exhibition of me in a place like this!"

"Oh, I don't know." Bellamy surveyed the restaurant without bias. "Not a bad little hole for people in our position."

The melon, inedible and uneaten, was removed, soup in cups was substituted.

" 'People in our position'! I'm to understand, then, any 'little hole' is good enough for me, so long as I don't interfere with Lucinda's parties at the Ritz."

Bellamy straightened his spine and put down his spoon. An understanding captain of waiters read his troubled eye and made casual occasion to draw the curtains across the front of the booth.

"It is because Lucinda's lunching at the Ritz today, isn't it?"

"My dear Amy," said Bellamy coolly: "I'm unaware of having done anything to provoke this, and if I've sinned unwittingly, I beg your pardon very truly. Won't you believe that, please, and let me off for today? I'm feeling rather rusty myself, my dear, and this is beginning to get on my nerves."

At his first words the woman drew back, flushing, eyes stormy above a mouth whose gentle allure lost itself in a hardening line. Then swiftly reconsideration followed, visibly the selfish second thought took shape in the angry eyes and melted their ice to a mist of unshed tears beneath

lids newly languorous. The petulant lips, too, refound their tremulous tenderness. Amelie's hand fell upon Bellamy's in a warm, convulsive clasp. She leaned across the corner of the table.

"Kiss me, Bel—I'm so wretched!"

He kissed her adequately but without any sort of emotion, thinking it strange, all the while her mouth clung to his, that he should so clearly know this to be good acting, no more than that, no less. Bellamy was not accustomed to see through women at so young a stage of intimacy; that came later, came surely; but never before had it come so soon. And in a little quake of dread he wondered if it were because he had grown old beyond his years, too aged in sentimental tippling to have retained the capacity for generous credulity of his younger years. Or was it that the woman's insincerity had so eaten out her heart, no technical perfection could lend persuasion to her playing, her caresses potency? Or that he had, since morning, fallen in love with his wife all over again and so truly that no rival passion could seem real?

It was true, at least, that his thoughts were quick and warm with memories of Linda even while he was most engaged with the effort to do justice to Amelie's lips. And perceiving this to be so, self-contempt took hold of him like a sickness.

They resumed their poses of nonchalant and sophisticated creatures amiably discussing an informal meal. But first the woman made effective use of a handkerchief.

"Forgive me, dear," she murmured. "I know it was perfectly rotten of me, but I couldn't help it. I'm a bit overwrought, Bel, not too happy; being in love with you has made the way things are at home doubly hard to endure, you must know that; and then—of course"—she smiled nervously—"I'm jealous."

He was silent, fiddling with a fork, avoiding her eye.

"Of Lucinda—you understand."

He said heavily: "Yes . . . "

She waited an instant, and when he failed to say more began to see that she had overplayed her hand.

"You do love me, don't you, Bel?"

"Of course."

"Then you must know how hard it is for me, you can't blame me for growing impatient."

This time he looked up and met her gaze. "Impatient for what?"

"Why, for what every woman expects when she's in love and the man whom she loves loves her; something definite to look forward to, I mean. We can't go on like this, of course."

"No, not like this."

"I'm not the kind of a woman for a hole-and-corner affair, Bel. If I were, you wouldn't be in love with me."

He nodded intently: "What do you propose?"

"I've been waiting for that to come from you, dear; but you never seem to live for anything but the moment."

"I've got to know what's in your mind, Amy. Tell me frankly."

"Well, then!"—she saw the mistake of it instantly, but for the life of her couldn't muffle the ring of challenge—"I fancy it means Reno for both of us."

"Meaning I'm to divorce Linda and marry you?"

She gave a deprecating flutter of hands. "What else can we do?"

Bellamy said with a stubborn shake of his head: "Never without good cause; and as far as I know, Linda's blameless. I'm a pretty hopeless proposition, I know, but not quite so bad as all that."

Amelie sat back, her colour rising. She could not misinterpret the determination in his temper; yet vanity would not permit her to forego one last attempt. "But if she should divorce you?"

"Deal with that when it comes up. Frankly, don't believe it ever will. Don't mean to give Linda any reason I can avoid."

"What you mean is, you really love——!"

"I mean," he cut in sharply, "whatever my shortcomings, I respect Linda, I won't hurt her if I can help it."

"How charming of you!"

For all acknowledgment she received a silent inclination of his head; and she began to laugh dangerously, eyes abrim with hatred, the heat in her cheeks shaming their rouge.

"Well, thank God I've come to understand you before we went any farther!"

"Amen to that."

"And so all your love-making has been simply——"

"The same as yours, Amy."

"Then why did you ever make love to me at all, please?"

"Because you let me see you wanted me to."

The brutal truth of that lifted the woman to her feet. "I don't think I care for any more luncheon," she said in a shaking voice. "If you don't mind . . . "

Bellamy rose, bowing from his place: "Not at all."

He offered to help her with her fur, but she wouldn't have that, threw the garment over her arm and flung round the table, then checked and looked back. "You understand—this ends it—for all time?"

"I couldn't do you the injustice of thinking anything else."

She made a tempestuous exit through the curtains. Bellamy grunted in self-disgust, lighted a cigarette, and looked up to see the suavely concerned countenance of Theodore.

"Something is wrong, Mr. Druce? The lady——?"

"Was suddenly taken ill. Be good enough to cancel the rest of the order, Theodore, and let me have my bill. And—yes, think I will—you may send me a Scotch and soda."

Bellamy consulted his watch. Just on two: Linda's luncheon party would be in full swing. He had nothing better to do, might as well look in at the Ritz. Linda would like it . . .

V

"THREE o'clock, Thomas, say a quarter to."

"Yes, madam."

The footman performed a faultless salute and doubled round to hop into place beside the chauffeur, while the door-porter shut the door with a bang whose nicely calculated volume told all the world within earshot that the door-porter of the fashionable hotel of the day was banging the door to Mrs. Bellamy Druce's brougham.

The technique of every calling is similarly susceptible of refinement into an art.

Two Lucinda Druces crossed the sidewalk and passed through the turnstile of bright metal and plate-glass which served as a door at the Forty-sixth street entrance to the Ritz-Carlton Hotel—the one perceptible to mortal vision a slender and fair young person costumed in impeccable taste and going her way with that unstudied grace which is the last expression of man's will to make woman a creature whose love shall adorn him.

To the luncheon-hour mob that milled in the meagre foyer of this hotel, which holds its public by studiously subjecting it to every Continental inconvenience, she presented the poise of a pretty woman who has never known care more galling than uncertainty as to her most becoming adornment. Not even the shadow of that other Lucinda who walked with her, who was no more separate from her than her own shadow, who ceased not to beat her bosom and cry to Heaven for help, was to be detected in the composed, steady eyes that searched swiftly, but without seeming to see, the faces of that congested congregation of fashionables and half-fashionables and

would-be fashionables, their apes and sycophants and audience.

Seeing nowhere those whom she was seeking, Lucinda made her way to the lounge; or it would be more true to say a way was made for her by the simple prestige of her presence, by the magic whisper of her name from mouth to mouth commanding a deference neither beauty nor breeding alone could have earned her.

The lounge was at that hour three-quarters invested by an overflow of tables from the dining-room proper, only at its eastern end a few easy chairs and settees had been left for the accommodation of those lucky enough to win past the functionary who guarded the portals, charged with winnowing the sheep from the goats, admitting the elect to this antechamber to the one true Olympus, shunting off the reject to the limbo of the downstairs grill.

Sighting Lucinda from afar, with a bow of ineffable esteem this one glided forward. "Mrs. Sedley and Mrs. Guest are waiting for you, Mrs. Druce." At the same time Lucinda herself discovered her friends occupying a settee, with Fanny Lontaine between them. "Your table is quite ready. Do you wish luncheon to be served at once?"

Lucinda assented pleasantly and passed on. Immediately the headwaiter caught the eye of a subaltern in the middle of the room, and in intimate silence conversed with him without moving a muscle more than the superciliary. The confederate acknowledged this confidence by significantly dropping his lashes, then in even more cryptic fashion flashed on the inspiring intelligence to that statuesque figure which, from the head of the stairs, between lounge and oval dining-room, brooded with basilisk eyes over the business of both. Thus a minor miracle was worked, bringing that one at once to life and down to earth; in another moment the maître-d'hôtel himself was attentive at Lucinda's elbow.

"But I never dreamed you three knew one another!"

she was exclaiming in the surprise of finding Fanny Lontaine on terms with those whom she had bidden to meet her. "Fanny, why didn't you tell me——?"

"But I didn't know—how should I?—your Nelly Guest was Ellen Field married."

"That's so; I'd completely forgotten you both come from Chicago."

"Hush!" Nelly Guest gave a stage hiss. "Someone might hear. You never forget anything, do you? And all these years I've tried so hard to live it down! It's no fair . . . "

Impressively convoyed, the quartet proceeded to "Mrs. Druce's table" in the oval room. Rumour of gossip and turning of heads attended their progress, flattery to which Lucinda, Nelly and Jean were inured, of which they were aware only as they were of sensuous strains of stringed music, the orderly stir of waiters, the satisfying sheen of silver and napery, the brilliance and brouhaha of that gathering of amiable worldlings, and the heady breath of it, a subtly blended, oddly inoffensive mélange of scents of flowers and scented flesh, smells of cooked food and cigarette smoke.

But in the understanding of Fanny Lontaine, accustomed to admiration as she was, and no stranger to the public life of European capitals, the flutter caused by the passage of her companions through a phase of existence so polite and skeptical conferred upon them an unmistakable cachet. She had been long abroad and out of touch, she had never been on intimate terms with New York ways, but the busy mind at work behind her round eyes of a child was like a sponge for the absorption of delicate nuances and significant signs of all sorts. Life had made it like that.

Six years married, and two years older than Lucinda Druce, Fanny retained, and would till the end, whatever life might hold in store for her, a look of wondering and eager youthfulness. Romance trembled veritably upon

her lashes. She had a way of holding her lips slightly apart and looking steadily at one when spoken to, as if nothing more interesting had ever been heard by the ears ambushed in her bobbed, ashen hair. Her eyes of a deep violet shade held an innocence of expression little less than disconcerting. Her body seemed never to have outgrown its adolescence, yet its slightness was quite without any angularity or awkardness, it achieved roundness without plumpness, a stroke of physical genius. In the question of dress she showed a tendency to begin where the extreme of the mode left off, a fault held venial in view of her apparent immaturity. And then, of course, she had lived so long in England, where people are more broad-minded . . .

Apparently not talkative but a good listener, she had a knack of making what she did say stick in memory, not so much for its content as for its manner, a sort of shy audacity that pointed observations often racy and a candour sometimes devastating. But unless one happened to be looking at Fanny when she spoke, her remarks were apt to seem less memorable, her humour less pungent.

"It's heavenly," she now declared, coolly staring at their neighbours through the smoke of her cigarette—"simply divine to be home. I'm sure I'd never want to see Europe again if it weren't for Prohibition."

"You're not going to suffer on that account today," Jean Sedley promised, producing from her handbag a little flash of jewelled gold.

"But I shall!" Fanny protested with tragic expression. "It's the frightful hypocrisy that's curdling my soul and ruining my insides. It makes one homesick for England, where people drink too much because they like it, and not to punish themselves for electing a government which conscientiously interprets the will of the people—and leaves them to interpret their wont."

"No dear, thanks." Smilingly Nelly Guest refused to let Jean fill her glass.

"The figure?" Jean enquired in deep sympathy.

"I've positively got to," Nelly sighed. She cast a rueful glance down over her plump, pretty person. "Compassionate Columbia simply must not waddle when she pokes her horn of plenty at famine-stricken China."

"Oh, that wretched pageant!" Lucinda roused from a lapse into communion with the Lucinda who made an unseen fifth. "When is it? I'd forgotten all about it." Nelly Guest named a day two weeks in the future. "And I haven't even thought about my costume! Oh, why do we punish ourselves so for Charity's sweet sake?"

"Because deep down in our hearts we all like to parade our virtues."

"Much virtue in that plural," Nelly Guest commented. "Well, I don't like parading mine in pageants, I assure you."

"Don't you, honestly, Cindy?" Fanny asked. "I should think you'd love that sort of thing. You used to be perfectly mad about acting."

"So is every woman—isn't she?—at one stage or another of her life convinced she's truly a great actress cheated out of her birthright."

"I know. All the same you know you've got talent. Don't you remember our open-air performance of *Much Ado About Nothing?* You were a simply ravishing Rosalind."

"Heavens! What do amateur theatricals prove?"

"For one thing," Jean Sedley commented, "how long-suffering one's friends can be."

"And one's enemies. Consider what they sit through just to see us make public guys of ourselves."

"Well!" Nelly Guest lamented: "my pet enemies are going to have a real treat at the pageant unless I can find some way to reduce, inside a fortnight."

"There was a man in London had a marvelous system," Fanny volunteered. "Everybody was going to him last Season. There ought to be somebody like him over here."

Duly encouraged, she launched into a startlingly detailed account of London's latest fad in "treatment"; and Lucinda's thoughts turned back to her other self, insensibly her identity receded into and merged with its identity again and became lost in its preoccupations.

How to go on, how to play out this farce of a life with Bel when faith in him was dead?

Strange that faith should have been shattered finally by such a minor accident as her overhearing that morning's treachery. As if it had been the first time she had known Bel to be guilty of disloyalty to her! But today she could not forget that neither love nor any kindly feeling for his wife, nor even scruples of self-respect, but only dread of a contretemps had decided Bel against lunching Amelie in that very room, making open show of his infatuation before all those people who knew them both and who, being human, must have gloated, nudged, and tittered; who, for all Lucinda knew to the contrary, were even now jeering behind their hands, because they knew things about Bel and his gallivantings which all the world knew but his wife. Even the servants——!

Her cheeks kindled with indignation—and blazed still more ardently when she discovered that she had, in her abstraction, been staring squarely at Richard Daubeney, who was lunching with friends at a nearby table.

But Dobbin bowed and smiled in such a way that Lucinda's confusion and her sense of grievance were drowned under by a wave of gratitude. She nodded brightly and gave him a half-laughing glance.

Good old Dobbin! She had never appreciated how much she was missing him till he had turned up again last night and offered to take his old place in her life, on the old terms as nearly as might be, the old terms as necessarily modified by her own change of status.

What a pity!

Those three words were so clearly sighed in her mental hearing that Lucinda, fearing lest she had uttered them

aloud, hastily consulted the faces of her companions. But they had exhausted the subject of reducing régimes and passed on naturally—seeing that Nelly and Jean were approaching that stage when such matters become momentous—to that of "facials."

" . . . Parr's fuller's earth and witch hazel. Make a thick paste of it and add a few drops of tincture of benzoin, then simply plaster it all over your face, but be careful not to get it near your eyes, and let it dry. It only takes a few minutes to harden, and then you crack and peel it off, and it leaves your skin like a baby's."

"Elizabeth Baird charges twenty-five dollars a treatment."

"But my dear, you can see for yourself how stupid it is to pay such prices to a beauty specialist when the materials cost only a few cents at any drug-store, and anybody can apply it, your maid if you don't want to take the trouble yourself." . . .

What a pity!

But was it? Would she have been happier married to Dobbin? Was it reasonable to assume that Dobbin would not have developed in the forcing atmosphere of matrimony traits quite as difficult as Bel's to deal with? In this wrong-headed world nobody was beyond criticism, and anybody's faults, condonable though they might seem at a distance, could hardly fail of exaggeration into vices through daily observation at close range. Impossible to imagine any two human creatures living together, after the first raptures had begun to wane, without getting on each other's nerves now and then.

Wasn't the fault, then, more with the institution than with the individuals?

Lucinda remembered having once heard a physician of psycho-analytic bent commit himself to the statement that in ten years of active professional life he had never entered one ménage where two people lived in wedded happiness. And sifting a list of married acquaintances,

Lucinda found it not safe to say of one that he or she was happy; of most it was true that they had the best of reasons for being unhappy. It was true of Nelly Guest and Jean Sedley, it was true of herself, doubtless it was true of Fanny. Lucinda had yet to meet Lontaine, and if Fanny's looks were fair criterion, she was the most carefree of women; and yet . . .

Fanny caught Lucinda eyeing her and smiled.

"What under the sun are you thinking about so solemnly, Cindy?"

"You, dear. You haven't told me anything about yourself yet."

"No chance. Give me half a show"—Fanny glanced askance at Jean and Nelly, now amiably engaged in bickering about the merits of various modistes—"and you shall know All."

"I'd dearly love to. You must lunch with me at home some day soon; and then I want you and your husband to dine with us—say next Thursday?"

"I don't know. That's one of the exciting things about being married to Harry Lontaine, one never knows what tomorrow will bring forth. We've got to go to Chicago soon, because—daresay you know—father relented enough to leave me a little legacy, nothing to brag about, but nothing people in our position can afford to despise, either."

Lucinda made a sympathetic face and said something vague about everybody in England still feeling the pinch of the War. But Fanny elected to scorn generalizations.

"Oh, the only effect the War could have had on our fortunes would have been to kill off the half a dozen relatives that stand between Harry and the title. But he was out of luck—served three years in France and Flanders and got all shot up and decorated with the dearest little tin medals on the prettiest ribbons, while his precious kins-

men held down cushy berths in the Munitions and kept in training for the longevity record."

"But how proud you must have been——!"

"Of Harry? On account of his decorations? My dear: heroes are three-a-penny in England today. You see, everybody, more or less, barring Harry's family, had a shot at active service, just as almost everybody has a shot at marriage sooner or later; only, of course, the percentage of unscarred survivors of the War was higher."

(Fanny, too! What a world!)

"For all that, I do want to meet your husband."

"You will, soon enough. He's lunching some men down in the grill, a business luncheon, American cinema people; and I told him when he got rid of them to wait for me in the lounge. Very likely we'll find him there on our way out."

"How nice. He's interested in the motion-picture business then?"

"In a way. That is, he was, in England, for a while, after the War. And when we decided to come over about my legacy, he secured options on the American rights to some Swedish productions. Somebody told him you were having a run on foreign films over here, so Harry said he might as well try to turn an honest penny. I told him it wouldn't do him any harm, he'd enjoy the adventure."

"I see," said Lucinda a bit blankly. "I don't know much about it, of course, almost never go to see a motion picture; that is, unless it's Elsie Ferguson, I've always been mad about her."

She looked round to the waiter who was substituting a finger-bowl for her neglected sweet. "We'll all want coffee, Ernest, and you may bring it to us in the Palm Room."

"Four demi-tasses: yes, Mrs. Druce."

"Nelly! Jean!" These Lucinda haled forth from the noisome morass of the newest divorce scandal. "Fanny's

first husband is waiting for her in the lounge, and she's getting nervous."

"Good-looking, I suppose?" Jean Sedley enquired, and got a merry nod from Fanny. "She ought to be nervous. A New York Winter is the open season for other women's good-looking husbands, it doesn't do to leave them standing round loose—here of all places!"

VI

FANNY'S husband came in shortly after Lucinda and her guests had settled down to coffee and cigarettes in a Palm Room now rapidly regaining its legitimate atmosphere of a lounge, as the extemporized tables were vacated, dismantled, and spirited away.

He fitted so neatly into the mental sketch of Lucinda's unconscious preconception, that she was naturally prejudiced in his favour. She liked Englishmen of that stamp, even if the stamp was open to criticism as something stereotyped, liked their manner and their manners and the way they dressed, with an effect of finish carelessly attained, as contrasted with the tight ornateness to which American men of the same caste are so largely prone.

Tall and well made, Lontaine had the good colour of men who care enough for their bodies to keep them keen and clean of the rust that comes of indoor stodging. The plump and closely razored face seemed perhaps a shade oversize for features delicately formed, and the blue eyes had that introspective cast which sometimes means imagination and frequently means nothing at all more than self-complacence. He affected a niggardly moustache, and when he spoke full lips framed his words noticeably. His habit was that of a man at ease in any company, even his own, who sets a good value on himself and confidently looks for its general acceptance.

He talked well, with assurance, some humour, and a fair amount of information. He had lived several years in the States, off and on, and on the whole approved of them. In fact, he might say there were only two sections

of the country with which he was unacquainted, the South and the Pacific Coast; defects in a cosmopolitan education which he hoped to remedy this trip, as to the Coast at least. He had pottered a bit with the cinema at home, and it was just possible he might think it worth his while to jog out to Los Angeles and see what was to be seen in that capital of the world's motion-picture industry. England, he didn't mind admitting, had a goodish bit to learn from America in the cinema line. They were far too conservative, the cinema lot at home, behind the times and on the cheap to a degree that fairly did them in the eye when it came to foreign competition. On the Continent, too, the cinema was making tremendous strides, while in England it was merely marking time. If you asked Lontaine, it was his considered belief that the really top-hole productions of the future would come of combining American brilliance of photography and investure with European thoroughness in acting and direction.

This by no means unintelligent forecast was uttered with an authority that impressed even Lucinda, elaborately uninterested as she was. Conscious of a rather pleasing deference in Lontaine, who was addressing himself to her more directly than to any of the others, she maintained a half-smile of amiable attention which would have deceived a sharper man, and let her thoughts drift on dreary tides of discontent.

Hour by hour the conviction was striking its roots more deeply into her comprehension that life with Bel on the present terms was unthinkable. And yet—what to do about it? She hadn't the remotest notion. Obviously she would have to arrive somehow at some sort of an understanding with Bel. But how? The one way she knew had failed her. And she knew no one to confide in or consult.

Her father had died several years before her marriage, her mother soon after. Of her immediate family there remained only an elder sister, married and living in Italy.

She saw herself a puny figure, with only her bare wits and naked need for allies, struggling to save her soul alive from a social system like a Molock of the moderns, a beast-god man has builded out of all that he holds hateful, all his fears and lusts and malice, envy, cruelty and injustice, and to which, having made it, he bows down in awe and worship, sacrificing to it all that he loves best, all that makes life sweet and fair . . .

A losing fight. One were mad to hope to win. Already Bel was lost, caught in the mad dance of the system's bacchants, already drunkard and debauchee . . . Nor might all her love redeem him . . . And O the pity!

Aware of pain welling in her bosom, a sense of suffocation, tears starting to her eyes, she jumped up hastily lest her friends should see, mumbled an excuse, and made her way out to the foyer, turning toward the women's cloak-room.

A few moments alone would restore equanimity, a little rouge and powder mend the wear of her emotions.

The foyer was still fairly thronged; she was almost in Bel's arms before she saw him, so near to him, when she stopped in shocked recognition of his grimace of affection, that she caught, as she started back, a heavy whiff of breath whiskey-flavoured.

She heard him say, "Why, hello, Linda! what's the hurry?" and cut in instantly with a gasp of indignation: "What are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd look in on your party. You know, you asked me——"

She could not trust her tongue. If she said more in her anger, she would say too much, considering that time and place, lose what poor vestiges of self-control remained to her, make a scene. She cried all in a breath: "Well, go away, then! I don't want you, I won't have you!"—and pushing past Bel, fled into the cloak-room.

He lingered half a minute, with perplexed eyes meeting the amused stares of those who had been near enough to

catch an inkling of the altercation; then drew himself up sharply and ironed out all indications of his embarrassment, assuming what he believed to be a look of haughty indifference.

But he was hurt, stricken to the heart by Lucinda's treatment. He couldn't think what he'd done to deserve it, he felt sure she couldn't have noticed the few drinks that had constituted luncheon for him. But whatever had been the matter, obviously it was up to him to find some way to placate Linda. He was through with Amelie and all such foolishness, from now on he was going to be good to Linda; and it wouldn't do at all to begin his new life by getting on the outs with her.

His gaze focused intelligently upon the glass case that displays the wares of the hotel florist. Women liked flowers. But there were four in Linda's party, her guests would think it funny if he joined them bringing flowers for his wife only . . . A tough problem. He decided to step round to the club and mull it over . . .

He had disappeared by the time Lucinda felt fit to show herself again. Inwardly still forlorn and disconsolate, but outwardly mistress of herself, she resumed her chair; and had hardly done so when she saw Richard Daubeney pass by with his luncheon party, pause at the door and take leave, then turn back and make directly for her corner. And instantaneously Lucinda experienced a slight psychic shock and found herself again the individual self-contained, the young woman of the world whom nothing could dismay.

Dobbin knew everybody except the Lontaines; and when the flutter created by his introduction had subsided, he found a chair by Lucinda's side and quietly occupied himself with a cigarette until the conversation swung back to the pageant; whereupon he took deft advantage of the general interest in that topic to detach Lucinda's attention.

"I couldn't resist the temptation to butt in, Cinda. Hope you don't mind."

"I do, though, fearfully. It's always nice to see you."

"Many thanks. Appreciation makes up for a lot of neglect."

"Poor old soul: somebody been neglecting you again?"

"Somebody's always neglecting me and my affectionate disposition. That's why I've wiggled to your side, wagging a friendly tail, ready to lick your hand at the first sign of an inclination to adopt me."

Lucinda eyed him in grave distrust. "Dobbin: are you trying to start something? I thought we'd settled all that last night, agreed I wasn't in a position to adopt stray men, no matter how nice."

"That was last night. You've had time to sleep on it. Lots of things can come up overnight to change a woman's mind. Don't tell me: I can see something unusual has happened."

"Oh! you can?"

"Don't be alarmed: you're not wearing your heart on your sleeve. I can see you're troubled about something, simply because I know you so much better than anybody else. Oh, yes, I do. You never knew how thoroughly I studied you in the dear, dead days of yore. I'll lay long odds no one else has noticed anything, but to my seeing eye you've been flying signals of distress all during luncheon. That being so, it wouldn't be decent of me not to give you a hail and stand by in case I'm needed—now would it?"

Momentarily Lucinda contended against temptation. Then, "You are a dear, Dobbin," she said almost regretfully. "But it isn't fair of you to see too much. If it's true I have secrets I don't want to share, it would be kinder to let me keep them—don't you think?"

"Lord bless you, yes! But it's my observation the human being in trouble has got to talk to somebody, and will to the wrong body if the right isn't handy. Not only

that, but you'll find most people will listen to your troubles only to get a chance to tell you their own; whereas I have none except the one you know all about. So you needn't fear reprisals."

She pondered this, sweetly serious, then in little better than a whisper said: "At least, not now . . . "

Jean Sedley was claiming her attention. "What do you think of that, Cindy? Isn't it a ripping idea?"

"Afraid I didn't hear—I was flirting with Dobbin."

"Yes, I know. But Mr. Lontaine has just made a priceless suggestion about the pageant. He says we can have moving-pictures taken as we enter the ballroom and shown before the evening is over."

"But is that possible?"

"Oh, quite," Lontaine insisted—"assure you. It's really extraordinary how they do these things, three or four hours is all they require to develop and prepare a film for projection. Say your pageant starts at ten: by one you can see yourself on the screen."

"Everybody would adore it!" Nelly Guest declared with deep conviction.

"And you could arrange it, Mr. Lontaine?"

"Easily, Mrs. Druce—that is to say, if I'm still in New York."

"What do you think, Cindy?" Jean urged. "Almost everybody is moving-picture mad. We could sell twice as many tickets on the strength of such a novelty. And it is a charity affair, you know."

"Meaning to say," Dobbin put in, "you're rather keen about it yourself."

"Of course—crazy to see myself as others see me. So is every woman—Fanny, Jean, Cindy——"

"I don't know," Lucinda demurred. "It must be a weird sensation."

"Not one you need be afraid of," Lontaine promised. "If you don't mind my saying so, you would screen wonderfully, Mrs. Druce."

"You think so, really?"

"Oh, no doubt about it, whatever. You're just the type the camera treats most kindly. If you wanted to, you could make a fortune in the cinema. No, seriously: I'm not joking."

"I'm glad of that," Lucinda returned soberly. "It wouldn't be at all nice of you to trifle with my young affections. Still, I will admit I'm skeptical."

"Tell you what," Lontaine offered eagerly: "Suppose you take test, what? No trouble at all to fix it up for you—chaps I know—only too glad—anything I say. I'd like to prove I know what I'm talking about. Take us all, for that matter, just as we are. What do you say?"

"I say it's perfectly damn' splendid!" Jean Sedley declared. "We'd all love it. When can you arrange it?"

"Any time you like—this afternoon, if that suits everybody. Only have to telephone, and in half an hour they'll be all ready for us. Shall I?" Lontaine got out of his chair. "Do say yes, all of you. Mrs. Druce? I know the others will if you do?"

"I don't mind . . . "

"Right-O! Give me five minutes . . . "

VII

LONTAINE brought back a gratified countenance from the telephone booths. As he had promised, so had he performed. This cinema chap he knew, Culp, had professed himself only too delighted. Rum name, what? A rum customer, if you asked Lontaine, diamond in the rough and all that sort of thing, one of the biggest guns in the American cinema to boot.

Dobbin wanted to know if Mr. Culp wasn't the husband of Alma Daley, the motion-picture actress. Lontaine said he was. Extraordinary pair. Married a few years ago when they were both stoney, absolutely. Now look at them; Culp a millionaire and better, Miss Daley one of the most popular stars. You might say he'd made her and she'd made him. Showed the value of team-work in marriage, what? You pulled together, and nothing could stop you. You pulled in opposite directions, and what happened? You stood still! What?

(Lucinda remarked the patient smile with which Fanny listened. But repetition is, after all, a notorious idiosyncrasy of the married male.)

Charming little woman, Miss Daley. As it happened, she was working in a picture at the studio now. Rare luck; they'd get a look in at practical producing methods in addition to getting shot for their tests. Not bad, what?

Somebody echoed "shot" with a puzzled inflection. But that term, it appeared, was studio slang; one was shot when one was photographed by a motion-picture camera. No doubt because they first aimed the camera at one, then turned the crank—like a machine-gun, Lontaine meant to say.

Lucinda discovered that it was already three o'clock, and wondered how long they would need to get properly shot. Lontaine protested it would take no time at all. Astonishing chaps, these American cinema people, absolutely full of push and bounce, did everything in jig-time, if you knew what he meant.

With two cars at its disposal, the party split up into threes, Mrs. Sedley, Mrs. Guest, and Lontaine leading the way. On the point of entering her own car after Fanny, however, Lucinda recalled her promise to look in at the bridge-tea for the Italian Milk Fund, and bidding Dobbin keep Fanny amused while they waited for her, turned back into the hotel to telephone Mrs. Wade that she would be a little late.

Having seen no more of Bellamy since their encounter near the cloak-room, she had assumed that he had taken her at her word, and had dismissed from her calculations the possibility of his returning. The surprise was so much the more unwelcome, consequently, when on leaving the telephone booth she saw her husband with his hat on the back of his head and his arms full of lavender orchids, wavering irresolutely in the entrance to the Palm Room, surveying with a dashed expression its now all but deserted spaces; a festive spectacle that left no room for surmise as to what he had been up to. And with sickening contempt added to the bitterness already rankling in her heart, Lucinda made hastily for the revolving door.

Simultaneously Bel caught sight of her and, with a blurred travesty of his really charming smile, and a faltering parody of that air of gallant alacrity which she had once thought so engaging, moved to intercept Lucinda. And finding her escape cut off, she paused and awaited him with a stony countenance.

"Ah! there you are, eh, Linda! 'Fraid I'd missed you. Sorry couldn't get back sooner, but——"

"I'm not," Lucinda interrupted.

"Had to go over to Thorley's to find these orchids

. . . " Bel extended his burden as if to transfer it to Lucinda's arms and, when she prevented this by falling back a pace, looked both pained and puzzled. "Ah—what say? What's matter?"

"I said," Lucinda replied icily, "I'm not sorry you couldn't get here sooner. Surely you can't imagine I'd care to have my friends see you as you are, in the middle of the afternoon. It's bad enough to have them know you get in this condition nearly every night."

"But—look here, Linda: be reasonable——"

"I think I have been—what you call reasonable—long enough—too long!"

Bellamy hesitated, nervously moistening his lips, glancing sidelong this way and that. But there was nobody in the foyer at the moment but themselves; even the coat-room girls had retired to their office and were well out of ear-shot of the quiet conversational key which, for all her indignation, Lucinda had adopted. For all of which the man should have been abjectly grateful. Instead of which (such is the wicked way of drink) Bellamy took heart of these circumstances, their temporary isolation and Lucinda's calculated quietness, and offered to bluster it out.

"Here—take these flowers, won't you? Plenty for you and all your friends. Tha's what kept me so long—had to go all over to find enough."

Again Lucinda defeated his attempt to disburden himself. "Oh, Bel!" she cried sadly—"how can you be such a fool?"

"How'm I a fool? Like flowers, don't you? Thought I was going to please you . . . And this is what I get!"

"You know all the orchids in New York couldn't make up for your drinking."

"Why cut up so nasty about a little drink or two? Way you talk, anyone'd think I was reeling."

"You will be before night, if you keep this up."

"Well, I'm not going to keep it up. I've made arrangements to have the afternoon free, just to be with you. We'll go somewhere—do something——"

"Thank you: I'd rather not."

"Don't talk rot." Most unwisely, Bellamy essayed the masterful method. "Of course we'll go some place——"

"We will not," Lucinda told him inflexibly. "My afternoon is booked full up already, and——"

"Where you going? I don't mind tagging along——"

"Sorry, but I don't want you."

Injudiciously again, Bellamy elected to show his teeth, stepped closer to Lucinda and with ugly deliberation demanded: "See here: where you going? I've got a right to know——"

"Have you, Bel? Think again. I never ask you such questions. If I did, you'd either lose your temper or lie to me, and justify yourself by asserting that no man ought to be asked to stand prying into his affairs. So—I leave you to your affairs—and only ask that you leave me to mine."

"Meaning you won't tell me where you're going?"

Lucinda shrugged and turned away; but Bellamy swung in between her and the exit.

"See here, Linda! there are limits to my patience."

"And to mine—and you have found them. Let me go."

She didn't move, but her face had lost colour, her eyes had grown dangerous. Neither spoke in that clash of wills until Bellamy's weakened, his eyes shifted, and he stepped aside, slightly sobered.

"Please!" he begged in a turn of penitence. "Didn't mean . . . Frightfully sorry if I've been an ass; but —you know—pretty well shot to pieces last night—had to pull myself together somehow to talk business at luncheon——"

"Oh! it was a business luncheon, then?" asked Lucinda sweetly, pausing.

"Of course."

With an ominous smile she commented: "It has come to that already, has it?"

"Ah—what d'you mean?"

"Since you tell me it was a business luncheon, you leave me to infer that your affair with Amelie has reached the point where you take her to the Clique Club to talk terms." Bellamy's jaw sagged, his eyes were dashed with consternation. "What else do you wish me to think, Bellamy?"

He made a pitiable effort to pull himself together. "Look here, Linda: you're all wrong about this—misinformed. I can explain——"

"You forget I know all your explanations, Bel; I've heard them all too often!"

"But—but you must give me a chance! Damn it, you can't refuse——!"

"Can't I? Go home, Bel, get some sleep. When you wake up, if you still think you have anything to say—consider it carefully before you ask me to listen. Remember what I tell you now: you've lied to me for the last time, one more lie will end everything between us, finally and for all time!"

Conscious though she was that her wrath was righteous, she experienced an instant of irresolution, of yielding and pity excited by the almost dog-like appeal in his eyes. But immediately she remembered Amelie, hardened her heart and, leaving him agape, pushed through the door to the street.

And instantly she effected one of those shifts of which few but the sensitive know the secret, who must hide their hurts from alien eyes though they spend all their strength in the effort; instantly she sloughed every sign of her anger and with smiling face went to rejoin Fanny and Dobbin.

As soon as she appeared the latter jumped out of the car and offered his hand. He said something in a jocular vein, and Lucinda must have replied to the point, for she

heard him chuckle; but she could not, a minute later, recollect one word of what had passed between them.

With her hand resting on Dobbin's she glanced back and saw Bellamy—still with his armful of orchids—emerge from the hotel. He halted, his face darkening as he watched Daubeney follow Lucinda into the car. It drew away quickly, giving him no chance to see for himself that it held another passenger.

He stood still upon the steps, deep in sombre and chagrined reflection, till a touch on his arm and a civil "Pardon!" roused him to the fact that he was obstructing the fairway. As he moved aside he was hailed by name.

"Well, I'm damned! Bellamy Druce drunk, dressed up, and highly perfumed."

In his turn, he recognized the speaker, a personage of the theatrical world with modest social aspirations and a noble cellar.

"Why, hello, Whittington!" said Bellamy, smiling in spite of his disgruntlement, to see that carved mask of a wise clown upturned to his. "All by yourself? What's happened to the girl crop you should be so lonesome?"

Without direct reply, Mr. Freddie Whittington linked his arm and began to walk toward Fifth avenue.

"Just the man I'm looking for," he declared without a smile. "Come along. Got a thousand women I want you to meet 'safternoon. They'll take care of your orchids."

"Well," Bellamy conceded, "that sounds reasonable. But what do you say, we drop in at the Club? Got something there won't do us any good—in my locker."

VIII

ON the far West Side, well beyond the drab iron articulation of the Ninth Avenue Elevated, in a region of New York whose every aspect was foreign to Lucinda's eyes, the brougham drew to a shuddering stop, in thoroughbred aversion to such surroundings, before a row of blank-avised brick buildings whose façades of varying heights and widths showed them to have been originally designed for diverse uses. That they were today, however, united in one service was proved by the legend that linked them together, letters of black on a broad white band running from end to end of the row beneath its second-story windows:

ALMA DALEY STUDIOS—CULP CINEMAS INC.—
BEN CULP, PRES'T.

Across the way unsightly tenements grinned like a company of draggletail crones who had heard a rare lot about the goings-on of picture actors and, through this happy accident of propinquity, were in a position to tell the world it didn't know the half of it. Children liberally embellished with local colour swarmed on sidewalks where ash and garbage-cans flourished in subtropical luxuriance, and disputed the roadway with the ramshackle wagons and push-carts of peddlers, horse-drawn drays, and grinding, gargantuan motor-trucks that snarled ferociously at the aliens, the frail, pretty pleasure cars from Fifth avenue. Apparently an abattoir was languishing nearby, discouraged in its yearning to lose consciousness of self in the world's oblivion. At the end of the street the Hudson

ran, a glimpse of incredible blue furrowed by snowy wakes.

Such the nursery in which what Mr. Culp (or his press agent) had brilliantly imaged as the youngest, fairest sister of the plastic arts was fostering the finest flower of its expression, to wit, the artistry of Alma Daley . . .

"Like a lily springing from the mire," Fanny Lontaine murmured.

Lucinda laughed and gave Fanny's arm a mock-pinch, grateful for any gleam of wit to lighten life's dull firmament. The temper in which she had left Bel at the Ritz had been quick to cool; and though its cooling had not affected her determination to brook no longer his misconduct, she was beginning to experience premonitions of that débâcle whose event was certain if this breach, so lately opened, were to widen.

If it should come to a break asunder, what would become of her? of the home she loved so well? and what of Bel, whom she loved best of all?

In the eyes of Dobbin, as he waited for her at the main entrance to the building, she read too shrewd a question; and understanding that she had for a moment let fall her mask, she hastily resumed that show of debonair amusement which was her heart's sole shield against the tearing beaks and talons of envy, malice and all manner of uncharitableness.

Fortunately there was something to jog her sense of humour in the utter absence of preparations to receive them, such as Lontaine had confidently promised.

A sense of hostility made itself felt even in the bare antechamber, a vestibule with makeshift walls of matchboarding, and for all features a wooden bench, a cardboard sign, NO CASTING TODAY, a door of woven iron wire at the mouth of a forbidding tunnel, and a window which framed the head of a man with gimlet eyes, a permanent scowl, and a cauliflower ear.

Interviewed by Lontaine, this one grunted skeptically

but consented to pass on the name and message to some person unseen, then resumed his louring and distrustful watch, while beyond the partition the professional sing-song of a telephone operator made itself heard: "Lis'n, sweetheart. Mista Fountain's here with a party, says he's got 'nappointmunt with Mista Culp . . . Wha' say? . . . Oh, a'right, dearie. Say, Sam: tell that party Mista Culp's into a conf'rince, but they kin go up to the stage if they wanta an' stick around till he's dis-'ngaged."

With every symptom of disgust the faithful watchdog pressed a button on the window ledge, a latch clicked, the wire door swung back, the party filed through and in twilight stumbled up two flights of creaking steps to a tiny landing upon which a number of doors stood all closed, and each sternly stencilled: PRIVATE.

After a moment of doubt during which even Lontaine began to show signs of failing patience, one of the doors opened hastily and ejected a well-groomed, nervously ingratiating young man, who introduced himself as Mr. Lane, secretary to Mr. Culp, and said he had been delegated to do the honours. A public-spirited soul, he shook each visitor warmly by the hand, protested that he was genuinely pleased to meet them all, then threw wide another of the PRIVATE doors.

"This is the main stage, ladies. Miss Daley is working on one of the sets now, making the final scenes for her latest picture, 'The Girl in the Dark'; so if you'll be kind enough not to talk out loud while she's before the camera . . . Miss Daley is very, er, temperamental, y'understand . . . "

Reverently the barbarians obeyed a persuasive wave of Mr. Lane's hand and tiptoed into the studio, to huddle in a considerately awe-stricken group on one side of an immense loft with a high roof of glass.

Stage, as the layman understands that term, there was none; but the floor space as a whole was rather elaborately

cluttered with what Lucinda was to learn were technically known as "sets," in various stages of completion and demolition; a set being anything set up to be photographed, from a single "side" or "flat" with a simple window or door, or an "angle" formed of two such sides joined to show the corner of a room, up to the solid and pretentious piece of construction which occupied fully one-half of the loft and reproduced the Palm Room at the Ritz-Carlton, not without discrepancies to be noted by the captious, but by no means without fair illusion.

On a modest set near at hand, apparently a bedchamber in a home of humble fortunes, a bored chambermaid in checked shirt and overalls, with a cigarette stuck behind his ear, was making up the bed.

In another quarter a number of workmen were noisily if languidly engaged in knocking down a built wall of real brick and lugging away sections of a sidewalk which had bordered it, light frames of wood painted to resemble stone.

At the far end of the room a substantial set represented a living-room that matched up with the bedchamber nearer at hand, or seemed to, for a good part of it was masked from Lucinda's view by a number of massive but portable metal screens or stands arranged in two converging ranks, at whose apex stood a heavy tripod supporting a small black box. To these stands lines of insulated cable wandered over the floor from every quarter of the room. Just back of the tripod several men were lounging, gazing off at the set with an air of listless curiosity. The spaces between the screens afforded glimpses of figures moving to and fro with, at that distance, neither apparent purpose nor animation.

Elsewhere about the studio, in knots, by twos and singly, some twenty-five or thirty men and women, mostly in grease-paint and more or less convincing afternoon dress, were lounging, gossiping, reading newspapers, or simply and beautifully existing.

An enervating atmosphere of apathy pervaded the place, as if nothing of much moment to anybody present was either happening or expected to happen. An effect to which considerable contribution was made by the lugubrious strains of a three-piece orchestra, piano, violin, and 'cello, stationed to one side of the living-room set.

At first sight this trio intrigued Lucinda's interest. To her its presence in a motion-picture studio seemed unaccountable, but not more so than patience with its rendition of plaintive and tremulous melodies of a bygone period, tunes which one more familiar with the cant of the theatre would unhesitatingly have classified as "sob stuff," and to which nobody appeared to be paying any attention whatever.

Mystified to the point of fascination, she studied the musicians individually.

The pianist, perched sideways on his stool and fingering the keyboard of an antique upright without once looking at the music on its rack, as often as not played with one hand only, using the other to manipulate a cigarette which he was smoking in open defiance of the many posted notices that forbade this practice.

The violinist, stretched out with ankles crossed, occupied a common kitchen chair which his body touched at two places only, with the end of his spine and the nape of his neck. His eyes were half-shut, his bowing suggested the performance of a somnambulist.

The 'cellist, too, seemed to be saved from falling forward from his chair solely by the instrument which his knees embraced. His head drowsily nodding to the time, the fingers of his left hand automatically stopped the strings at which his right arm sawed methodically. An honest soul, a journeyman who for a set wage had contracted to saw so many chords of music before the whistle blew and was honestly bent on doing his stint . . .

Mr. Lane, having excused himself for a moment, re-

turned from consulting some member of the group round the tripod.

" 'Sall right," he announced with a happy smile. "They won't begin shooting a while yet. You can come closer if you want, I'll show you where to stay so's you won't be in the way."

Guided by him, the exotics gingerly picked their way across the banks, coils, loops and strands of electric cable that ran in snaky confusion all over the floor, like exposed viscera of the cinema; and Lucinda presently found herself on the side lines of the living-room, between it and the dogged orchestra, and well out of range of the camera.

She could now see three people on the set, two men with a girl whom, thanks to the wide circulation of the lady's photographs, she had no difficulty in identifying as Alma Daley herself—a prepossessing young person with bobbed hair, a boldly featured face, comely in the flesh rather than pretty, and a slight little body whose emaciation told a tale of too-rigorous dieting and which she used not unpleasingly but with a rather fetching effect of youthful gaucherie. Her make-up for the camera was much lighter and more deftly applied than seemed to be the rule. Gowned effectively if elaborately in a street dress hallmarked by the rue de la Paix, she was leaning against a table and lending close if fatigued attention to the quiet conversation of the two men.

Of these one was tall and dark, with a thick mane of wavy black hair, a wide and mobile mouth, and great, melancholy eyes. His well-tailored morning-coat displayed to admiration a splendid torso. The other was a smaller, indeed an undersized man, who wore a braided smoking-jacket but no paint on his pinched, weather-worn face of an actor. His manner was intense and all his observations (and he was doing most of the talking) were illustrated by gesticulation almost Latin in its freedom and vividness.

"King Laughlin," Mr. Culp's secretary informed Lu-

cinda—"man in the smoking-jacket, he always wears one when he's working—greatest emotional director in the business, nobody can touch him. Why, alongside him, Griffith's a joke in a back number of Judge. You wouldn't guess what he gets: thirty-five hundred."

"That's almost a thousand a week, isn't it?"

"Thousand a *week*!" Mr. Lane suspiciously inspected Lucinda's profile. Could it be possible that this well-born lady was trying to kid him? But no; he could see she was quite guileless. In accents of some compassion he corrected: "Three-thousand five-hundred every week's what King Laughlin drags down in the little old pay en*vel*ope. But that's Mr. Culp all over; expense's no object when he's making an Alma Daley picture, nothing's too good."

"I'm sure . . . " Lucinda agreed vaguely.

Out of the corner of an eye the director had become aware of a new audience and one worthy of his mettle, and he was already preparing to play up to it. Dropping the easy, semi-confidential manner in which he had been advising the younger and taller man, with surprising animation Mr. King Laughlin snatched a silk hat and stick from the other's unresisting hands.

"Right-O, Tommy!" he said in the nasal tune of the English Midlands. "I think you've got me now, but just to make sure I'll walk through it with Alma." He turned graciously to the woman: "Now, Alma dear . . . "

Miss Daley, herself not unconscious of a fashionable gallery, shrugged slightly to signify that she didn't mind if Mr. Laughlin thought it really worth while, it was all in the day's drudgery, and made a leisurely exit from the set by way of a door in its right-hand wall. At the same time Mr. Laughlin walked off by a door approximately opposite, and the young man in the morning-coat strolled down to the front of the set and settled himself to observe and absorb the impending lesson.

Mr. Laughlin then re-entered in character as a dégagé gentleman with an uneasy conscience, indicating this last

by stealthily opening and peering round the edge of the door before coming in and closing it with caution, and gentility by holding hat and stick in one hand and carelessly trailing the ferrule of the stick behind him. Relieved to find the room untenanted, he moved up to the table, placed the hat on it crown-down, propped the stick against it, turned and gave the door in the right-hand wall a hard look, then bent over the table and pulled out and began to ransack one of its drawers. Thus engaged, he said clearly: *"All right, Alma!"* and immediately gave a start, whereby it appeared that he had heard footfalls off, and slammed the drawer. At this Miss Daley entered, a listless little figure so preoccupied with secret woe that she quite failed at first to see Mr. Laughlin, and when she did gave a start even more violent than his had been, clasping both hands to her bosom and crying out in a thrilling voice: *"Egbert!"*

Mr. Laughlin kept his temper admirably under the sting of this epithet; all the same, anyone could see he didn't fancy it a bit. However, first and always the gentleman, he offered Miss Daley a magnanimous gesture of outstretched hands. Instantly the poor girl's face brightened with a joyous smile, a happy cry trembled upon her lips as she ran to his arms. He enfolded her, with a fond hand ground her features into the shoulder of his smoking-jacket, and turned his own toward the camera, working them into a cast of bitter anguish.

Gently rescuing herself, Miss Daley discovered *Egbert's* hat and stick, turned to him and looked him up and down with dawning horror, audibly protesting: *"But Egbert! you are going out!"* He attempted a disclaimer, but it wouldn't wash, the evidence of the top hat and the smoking-jacket was too damning; and in the end he had to give in and admit that, well, yes, he was going out, and what of it.

Evidently Miss Daley knew any number of reasons why he ought to stay in, but she made the grave mistake

of trying to hold him with affection's bonds, throwing herself upon his neck and winding her arms tightly round it. And that was too much: *Egbert* made it clear that, while he'd stand a lot from a woman to whom he was Everything, there was such a thing as piling it on too thick. And against her frenzied resistance he grasped her frail young wrists, brutally broke her embrace, and flung her from him. She fell against the table, threw back her head to show the pretty line of her throat, clutched convulsively at her collar-bone, and subsided upon the floor in a fit of heartbroken sobbing; while *Egbert* callously took his hat, clapped it on his head, and marched out by a door in the rear wall, his dignity but slightly impaired by the fact that the hat was several sizes too large and would have extinguished him completely if it hadn't been for his noble ears.

Without pause Mr. Laughlin doubled round to the front of the set, threw the waiting actor a brusque "See, Tommy? Get what I mean?" and encouraged Miss Daley with "That's wonderful, Alma dear. Now go on, right through the scene."

Miss Daley, lying in complete collapse, with her head to the camera, writhed up on an elbow, planted her hands upon the floor and by main strength pushed her heaving shoulders away from it, keeping a tortured face turned to the camera throughout. Then she got her second wind, caught hold of the edge of the table, pulled herself up, looked around wildly, realized that she was a deserted woman, saw her hat by Tappé hanging on the back of a morris-chair by Ludwig Baumann, seized it, rushed to the door by which *Egbert* had escaped, and threw herself out in pursuit.

Mr. Laughlin clapped gleeful hands.

"Fine, Alma, wonderful! You're simply marvelous today, dear. Now Tommy, run through it just once with Alma, and then we'll shoot."

Mr. Lane bustled about and found chairs for Lucinda

and her friends, upon which they composed themselves to watch Tommy interpret Mr. King Laughlin's tuition in the art of acting for the screen.

To the best of Lucinda's judgment, however, the greater part of Mr. Laughlin's efforts had meant to Tommy precisely nothing at all. Beyond the rudimentary mechanics of the physical action sketched in by the director, Tommy made no perceptible attempt to follow pattern, and disregarding entirely its conventional but effective business, embellished the scene instead with business which was, such as it was, all his own, or more accurately that of a dead era of the speaking stage.

Like a wraith of histrionism recalled from the theatre of *East Lynne* and *The Silver King,* Tommy carved out his effects with flowing, florid gestures, and revived the melodramatic stride and heroic attitudinizing; and though he wilfully made faces at the camera throughout, he demonstrated the deep veneration in which he really held it by never once showing it his back, until, having duly spurned the clinging caresses of Miss Daley, he was obliged to march to the door, and even then he made occasion to pause with a hand on the knob and, throwing out his chest and fretfully tossing rebellious black locks from tragic brows, granted the camera the boon of one last, long look at him ere making his exit.

And when Mr. Laughlin tranquilly approved this performance and announced that they would forthwith "shoot it," Lucinda began to wonder if there were possibly something wrong with her own powers of observation.

"But," she protested to Mr. Lane, who had coolly elected himself her special squire and placed his chair close to hers—"that man they call Tommy—he didn't play the scene as Mr. Laughlin did."

"Oh, Tommy Shannon!" said Mr. Lane equably—"Tommy's all right, he knows what he's doing—best leading man in the movin' picture business, bar none. King

Laughlin knows he can trust Tommy to put it over his own way. All you got to do is to let Tommy Shannon alone and he'll ring the gong every shot."

"But if that's the case, why did Mr. Laughlin take so much trouble to show him——?"

"Well, you see, it's this way," Mr. Lane explained: "King's all right, and Tommy's all right, too, both stars in their line; but if Tommy don't see a scene the way King shows him, and King starts to bawl him out, why, Tommy 'll just walk off the lot. And then where are you? You can't finish your picture without your leading man, can you? And there's maybe a hundred-and-fifty or two-hundred thousand dollars invested in this production already. One of the first things a director's got to learn in this game is how to handle actors. That's where King Laughlin's so wonderful, he never had an actor quit on him yet."

"I see," said Lucinda thoughtfully. "The way to handle an actor is to let him have his own way."

"You got the idea," Mr. Lane approved without a smile.

"But suppose," she persisted—"suppose the leading man insists on doing something that doesn't suit the part he's supposed to play, I mean something so utterly out of character that it spoils the story?"

"Sure, that happens sometimes, too."

"What do you do then?"

"That's easy. What's your continuity writer for?"

"I don't know, Mr. Lane. You see, I don't even know what a continuity writer is."

"Why, he's the bird dopes out the continuity the director works from—you know, the scenes in a picture, the way they come out on the screen: Scene One, Scene Two, and all like that."

"You mean the playwright?"

"Well, yes; only in pictures he's called a continuity writer."

"But that doesn't tell me what you do when an actor insists on doing something that spoils the story."

"That's just what I'm trying to tell you, Mrs. Druce. You get your continuity writer, of course, and have him make the change."

"You mean you change the story to please the actor?"

"Sure: it's the only thing to do when you got maybe a hundred-and-fifty or two-hundred thousand dollars hung up in a picture."

"But doesn't that frequently spoil the story?"

"Oh, what's a story?" Mr. Lane argued reasonably. "People don't go to see a story when they take in an Alma Daley picture. They go because they know they get their money's worth when they see a Ben Culp production that's taken from some big Broadway success and costs a hundred-and-fifty or maybe two-hundred thousand dollars. But princip'ly, of course, they go to see Alma Daley, because she's the most pop'lar actress on the screen, and makes more money than Mary Pickford, and wears the swellest clothes that cost sometimes as much as twenty thousand dollars for each picture; and besides she's the grandest little woman that ever looked into a lens, and there's never been no scandal about her private life, and an Alma Daley picture's sure to be clean. Why, Mr. Culp wouldn't let Miss Daley act in any picture where she had to be wronged or anything like that. When he buys a play for her and the heroine's got a past in it or anything, he just has the story changed so's there's never any stain upon her honour or anything anybody could get hold of. That's one thing Mr. Culp's very partic'lar about; he says no wife of his shall ever go before the public in a shady part."

"Has he many?"

Mr. Lane looked hurt, but was mollified by the mischief in Lucinda's smile.

"Well, you know what I mean. But we better stop

talking, if it's all the same to you, Mrs. Druce, or Miss Daley 'll get upset. They're going to shoot now."

The warning was coincident with the sudden deluging of the set with waves of artificial light of a weird violet tint, falling from great metal troughs overhead and beating in horizontally from the metal stands or screens, which were now seen to be banks of incandescent tubes burning with a blinding glare.

Nor was this all: shafts and floods of light of normal hue were likewise trained upon the scene from a dozen different points, until the blended rays lent almost lifelike colouring to the faces of the actors, whose make-up had theretofore seemed ghastly and unnatural to uninitiate eyes.

Stationed just beyond the edge of the area of most intense illumination, the audience sat in a sort of violet penumbra whose effect was hideously unflattering. In it every face assumed a deathly glow, resembling the phosphorescence of corruption, the red of cheeks and lips became purple, and every hint of facial defect stood out, a purple smudge. So that Lucinda, reviewing the libelled countenances of her companions, breathed silent thanks to whatever gods there were for their gift of a complexion transparent and immaculate.

"Camera!"

The command came from King Laughlin. Lucinda could just hear a muffled clicking, and seeking its source discovered a youngish man, with a keen face and intelligent eyes, standing behind the tripod and turning in measured tempo a crank attached to the black box.

Coached by Mr. Laughlin, who danced nervously upon the side lines, the scene was enacted.

"Now, Tommy, come on—slowly—hold the door—look around, make sure the room is empty—hold it—now shut the door—up to the table—don't forget where to put your hat—'sright, splendid! Now you look at the other door—listen—show me that you don't hear anything—good!

Open the drawer—easy now, remember you're trying not to make a noise—look for the papers—show me you can't find them. *My God! where can they be!* That's it. Now you hear a noise off—*(Ready, Alma!)*—shut the drawer—start to pick up your hat—too late—! Come on, Alma—*come on!* You don't see him, you look out of the window and sigh—let's see you sigh, Alma—beautiful! beautiful! Now, Tommy, you move—she sees you—see him, Alma. Slowly—hold it—wonderful! Now call to him, Alma—*Egbert! Egbert!!*"

The little man's voice cracked with the heart-rending pathos he infused into that cry; but he did not pause, he continued to dance and bark directions at star and leading-man till the door closed behind Miss Daley's frantic exit; when all at once he went out of action and, drawing a silk bandanna from his cuff to mop the sweat of genius on his brows, turned mild, enquiring eyes to the cameraman.

"Got it," that one uttered laconically.

"Think we want to take it over, Eddie?" The cameraman shook his head. "Good! Now we'll shoot the close-up. No, Tommy, not you—the only close-up I want for this scene is Alma where she gets up. We must get those tears in, she cries so pretty."

There was some delay. The camera had to be brought forward and trained at short range on the spot where Miss Daley had fallen; several stands of banked lights likewise needed to be advanced and adjusted. And then Miss Daley had to be given time to go to her dressing-room and repair the ravages her complexion had suffered in *Egbert's* embrace. But all these matters were at length adjusted to the satisfaction of director; the actress lay in a broken heap with her face buried on her arms, the camera once more began to click, Mr. King Laughlin squatting by its side, prepared to pull the young woman through the scene by sheer force of his inspired art.

But now the passion which before had kept him hopping

and screaming had passed into a subdued and plaintive phase; Mr. Laughlin was suffering for and with the heroine whose woes were to be projected before the eyes and into the hearts of half the world. He did not actually cry, but his features were knotted with the anguish that wrung his heart, and his voice was thick with sobs.

"Now, dear, you're coming to—you just lift your head and look up, dazed. You don't realize what's happened yet, you hardly know where you are. *Where am I, my God! where am I?* That's it—beautiful. Now it begins to come to you—you remember what's happened, you get it. He has cast you off—*O my God! he has deserted you.* Fine—couldn't be better—you're great, dear, simply great. Now go on—begin to cry, let the big tears well up from your broken heart and trickle down your cheeks. Fine! Cry harder, dear—you must cry harder, this scene will go all flooey if you can't cry any harder than that. Think what he was to you—and now he has left you—*who knows?—perhaps for-ev-er!* Your heart is breaking, dear, it's breaking, and nobody cares. Can't you cry harder? Listen to the music and . . . Good God! how d'you expect *any*body to cry to music like that?"

The last was a shriek of utter exasperation; and bounding to his feet the little man darted furiously at the musicians, stopping in front of the trio and beginning to beat time with an imaginary baton.

"Follow me, please—get this, the way *I* feel it. So—slowly—draw it out—hold it—get a little heart-break into it!"

And strangely enough he did manage to infuse a little of his fine fervour into the three. They abandoned their lethargic postures, sat up, and began to play with some approach to feeling; while posing before them, swaying from the toes of one foot to the toes of the other, his hands weaving rhythms of emotion in the air, the absurd creature threw back his head, shut his eyes, and wreathed his thin lips with a beatific smile.

Throughout, on the floor, before the camera, under that cruel glare of lights, Alma Daley strained her face toward the lens and cried as if her heart must surely break, real tears streaming down her face—but cried with fine judgment, never forgetting that woman must be lovely even in woe.

And while Lucinda watched, looking from one to the other, herself threatened with that laughter which is akin to tears, a strange voice saluted her.

"Saw me coming," it observed, "and had to show off. He's a great little actor, that boy, and no mistake—never misses a chance. Look't him now: you'd never guess he wasn't thinking about anything but whether I'm falling for this new stunt of his, would you?"

Lucinda looked around. Mr. Lane had mysteriously effaced himself. In his place sat a stout man of middle-age with a sanguine countenance of Semitic type, shrewd and hard but good-humoured.

"How d'you do?" he said genially. "Mrs. Druce, ain't it? Culp's my name, Ben Culp."

IX

OF a sudden Miss Daley missed her mentor's voice, his counsel and encouragement, and in the middle of a sob ceased to cry precisely as she might have shut off a tap.

In a moment of uncertainty, still confronting the clicking camera, still bathed in that withering blaze, she cast about blankly for her runagate director. Then discovering that he had, just like a man! deserted her in her time of trouble to follow a band, outraged womanhood asserted itself, in a twinkling she cast her passion like a worn-out garment and became no more the broken plaything of man's fickle fancy but once again the spoiled sweetheart of the screen.

As Lucinda saw it, there was something almost uncanny in the swiftness and the radical thoroughness of that transfiguration, the fiery creature who sprang to her feet with flashing eyes and scornful mouth was hardly to be identified with the wretched little thing whom she had seen, only a few seconds since, grovelling and weeping on the floor.

The cameraman stopped cranking and, resting an elbow on his camera, turned with a satiric grin to observe developments. And following a sharp, brief stir of apprehension in the ranks of the professional element, there fell a dead pause of dismay, a complete suspension of all activities other than those of the musicians and their volunteer leader, and of the calloused carpenters, who, as became good union laborers, continued to go noisily to and fro upon their lawful occasions, scornful of the impending storm.

As one who finds the resources of her mother tongue inadequate, Miss Daley in silence fixed with a portentous stare the back of King Laughlin, who, all ignorant of the doom hovering over his devoted head, kept on swaying airily to and fro, smiling his ecstatic smile and measuring the music with fluent hands.

One of the Daley feet began to tap out the devil's tattoo, she set her arms akimbo, her eyes were quick with baleful lightnings, her pretty lips an ominous line; an ensemble that only too clearly foretold: *At any minute, now!*

With a smothered grunt Mr. Culp heaved out of his chair and lumbered over to his wife, interposing his not negligible bulk between her and the unconscious object of her indignation—and in the very nick of time, or Lucinda was mistaken.

What he said couldn't be heard at that distance, the sour whining of the violin, the lamentations of the 'cello, and the tinkle-tinkle of the tinny piano conspired to preserve inviolate those communications between man and wife which the law holds to be privileged. But Lucinda noticed a backward jerk of the Culp head toward the group of which she made one, and caught a glance askance of the Daley eyes, oddly intent and cool in contrast with the guise of unbridled fury which her features wore. And whatever it was that Mr. Culp found to say, indisputably it proved effectual; for nothing worse came of Miss Daley's wrath, at least publicly, than a shrewish retort inaudible to bystanders, a toss of her head, and a sudden, stormy flight from the scene.

Mr. Culp followed with thoughtful gaze her retreat toward her dressing-room, then looked a question to the cameraman.

" 'Sallright," said that one, imperturbable. "Got enough of it."

Mr. Culp nodded in relief, and signed to the electricians. As he made his way back to Lucinda's side the lights sputtered out. And as soon as this happened Mr. King

Laughlin, cruelly wrenched out of his dream-land of melody, came down to an earth clangerous with the harsh dissonances of reality.

"What the—where the—what—!" he stammered, looking in vain for the little woman whom he had so heartlessly abandoned in her woe on the living-room set. Then, catching sight of her half-way across the studio, he bleated *"Alma!"* once in remonstrance, and again in consternation, and set out in panic pursuit.

Before he could overtake her, Miss Daley disappeared round one side of the Palm Room, at which point, beating the air with suppliant hands, Mr. Laughlin disappeared in turn.

"That's the sort of thing you're up against all a time in the fillum business, d'y'see," sighed Mr. Culp with a rueful grin. "A lot of kids, that's what we got to make pitchers with. And audiences all a time kickin' because we don't make 'em better. . . . A lot of kids!"

He did not, however, appear greatly disheartened, but recounted his tribulations rather as a matter of course, appealing informally to the sympathies of his guests.

"King Laughlin all over, nice a little feller's anybody'd want to work with, but temp'amental, d'y'see, got to show off like a kid every time he gets a chance. And what's the answer? Mrs. Culp gets sore, says she won't do another stroke of work s'long's King's directin'. And here we was tryin' to finish shootin' today, behind on our release date and all, and thirty extra people, d'y'see, gettin' five and seven and maybe ten dollars, been waitin' all day to work on the big set and got to be paid whether they work or not . . . "

Mr. Culp broke off suddenly, singled out from the attendant cloud of retainers a young man wearing an eyeshade and a badgerred expression, and instructed him to send the extra people packing, but to tell them to report for work at eight o'clock the next day.

" 'Sno use keepin' 'em any longer, 'safternoon," he ex-

plained confidentially. "When that little woman says a thing she means it, d'y'see, so chances are it'll be mornin' before she changes her mind. And if you ladies 'll excuse me, I guess I ought to be sittin' in with her and King now. The only things they think I'm any good for, in this studio, is pay salaries and referee battles."

He was affably disposed to waive ceremony under the circumstances, but gave in with good grace when Lontaine insisted on formally presenting him to each of his guests; and thus reminded of the first purpose of their visit, which he seemed to have forgotten altogether, Mr. Culp delayed long enough to recall the worried young man with the eyeshade, whom he made known as Mr. Willing, the assistant director, and charged with supervision of the proposed tests.

And Mr. Willing was to understand that these were to be regular tests and no monkey business; he was to see that someone with plenty of know-how helped the ladies make up; after which he was to shoot the party as a whole in some little scene or other, in addition to making individual close-ups.

If Mr. Willing accepted this commission with more resignation than enthusiasm, he proved to be a modest person with pleasing manners and no perceptible symptoms of temperament. And he was as good as his name. It was his suggestion that a corner of the Palm Room be utilized, as most suitable for the group scene. And while the cameraman was amiably setting up his instrument to command this new location and superintending the moving of the lights, it was Mr. Willing who conducted Lucinda, Nelly, Jean and Fanny to a barn-like dressing-room and hunted up a matronly actress, a recruit from the legitimate theatre, to advise and assist them with their respective make-ups.

Lucinda killed time while waiting for her turn by trying her own hand with grease-paint, powder, and mascaro, with the upshot that, when she presented her face for in-

spection and revision, the actress refused to change the effect by the addition or subtraction of a single touch, and laughingly declined to believe it had been achieved without experience.

"It's no use, Mrs. Druce, don't tell me you haven't been in the business!"

"On the stage, you mean? But only in the most amateurish way, schoolgirl theatricals."

"No," the woman insisted—"they don't make up like that for a test unless they're camera-wise."

To this she stuck stubbornly; and Lucinda found herself curiously pleased, though she had done no more to deserve commendation than supplement native good taste and an eye for colour with close observation of the Daley make-up and how it had fared under the lights.

Another compliment signalized their return to the studio; nothing less than the presence of Miss Daley—"in person"—composed, agreeable, hospitable, showing every anxiety to make their tests successful and never a sign of the storm that had presumably broken behind the scenes.

But Lucinda reckoned it significant that Mr. King Laughlin was nowhere visible.

"I thought it would be nice if we could all have tea in my dressing-room," Miss Daley explained; "and then Daddy suggested we could have it served here, on the set—make a regular little scene of it, you know, for the camera."

"I'm sure that would be delightful," replied Lucinda, suspended judgment melting into liking even in those first few minutes.

"Oh, Daddy thinks of all the nice things!"

"And I'll see each you ladies gets a print," Culp volunteered benignly, "so's you can get it run through a projectin' machine any time you want, d'y'see, and show your friends how you once acted with Alma Daley."

"Daddy! don't be ridiculous."

Vivacious, by no means unintelligent, and either an excellent actress in private life or else an unpretending body, happy in her success and unashamed of humble beginnings, Miss Daley was tactful enough to make her guests forget themselves and the trial to come, as they took their places—with no prearrangement but much as if they were actually meeting at the Ritz—and were served with tea by actor-waiters in correct livery. All the same, Lucinda noticed that their hostess ingeniously maneuvered to a central position in the foreground, where she sat full-face to the camera; this being by far her best phase. And just before the lights blazed up, the girl launched into a spirited account of her passage-at-arms with King Laughlin, which, recited without malice but with keen flair for the incongruous, carried the amateur players easily over the first minutes, in which otherwise constraint must inevitably have attended camera-consciousness.

"I was so fussed," she concluded, "I swore I'd never act another scene for him. But when I remembered how foolish he looked, posing in front of that awful orchestra like a hypnotized rabbit, I just had to laugh; and I couldn't laugh and be mad at the same time, of course. And then I had to tell King what I was laughing at, and that made him so ashamed he's sulking in his office now and won't come out while any of you are here."

"Then all's serene-o once more, Miss Daley?"

"Oh, sure. You see, Mr. Lontaine, we've simply got to finish this picture tonight, somehow, even if we have to work on till morning; so I accepted his apology and made it up."

"But those extra people Mr. Culp let go——?"

"That's all right," Culp responded from his place beside the camera. "When I see how things was goin', I sent down to the cashier and told him not to pay 'em off, so they didn't any of 'em get away."

At this point, clever actress that she was, Miss Daley extemporized a star part for herself by rising without

warning and announcing that she would have to run and change for the scenes to be photographed as soon as the tests had been made.

"I'll hurry and try to get ready before you go," she said, shaking hands all round with charming grace; "but if I don't see you again, it's been just wonderful to meet you all, and I do hope this isn't good-bye forever!"

The general flutter in acknowledgment of her farewells had barely subsided when the bank lights hissed out and the camera stilled its stuttering.

"Nice little scene," Mr. Culp applauded generously, intercepting Lucinda as, with the others, she left the set, clearing it for the individual tests. "Goin' to screen pretty. You'll be surprised."

"Can you really tell, Mr. Culp?"

"How it's goin' to look in the projectin'-room, y'mean? Sure. Not that I'd gamble on my own judgment, I don't pretend to know how to make pitchers; all I know's how to make money makin' 'em, d'y'see. When I say that little scene's goin' to go great on the screen, I'm bankin' on Jack here."

He dropped an affectionate, fat hand on the shoulder of the cameraman. "Excuse me, Mrs. Druce, want to introduce you to Mr. Jack Timilty, best little cameraman ever turned a crank." The cameraman grinned sheepishly and proferred a diffident hand. "No temp'ament, no funny business about Jack, Mrs. Druce, always on the job and deliverin' the goods. And sticks, d'y'see. Take it the way it is nowadays, you don't hardly get time to get to know a director before he stings somebody else for a coupla hundred dollars more'n you're paying him, d'y'see, and quits you cold as soon's he finishes his pitcher. But Jack sticks. That's why y'always can count on good photography and lightin' effects in an Alma Daley production. And when Jack says that little scene took pretty, I *know* it did."

"'Sright, Mrs. Druce," Mr. Timilty averred. "I

wouldn't like to say about the others, but you and that other little blonde lady——"

"Mrs. Lontaine."

"Guess so, ma'm, didn't catch her name. Her and you registered like a million dollars."

"It's awfully nice of you to tell me so, Mr. Timilty——"

"Jack wouldn't pass you a compliment unless he meant it, Mrs. Druce. He's no kidder."

"Anyway I guess it ain't the first time anybody's told you that, ma'm. It's easy to see you've been camera-broke."

"But I haven't," Lucinda protested, laughing. "Really, I assure you——"

At this juncture Mr. Willing called for Mr. Timilty's co-operation in taking the test of Jean Sedley. So Lucinda stood aside and watched and wondered if it were really true that she had shown any evidences of ability out of the ordinary.

Not that it mattered.

Nevertheless the little fillip adminstered to her self-esteem made her feel more contented; into the bargain, it deepened her interest in the business in hand.

Mr. Willing seemed to be taking a deal of pains to make fair and thorough tests. For each of the four women he improvised brief but effective solo scenes to bring out their best points, if nothing that made severe demands upon the ability of the subject or the invention of the director.

Lucinda, for example, was discovered to the camera arranging flowers in a vase. A servant entered, delivered a letter, retired. Lucinda recognized the handwriting, and (the word was new to her in this application) "registered" delight, then—as, smiling, she opened and read the letter—bewilderment, misgivings, and a shock of cruel revelation which strangled all joy of living in her, struck her down, and left her crushed and cringing in a chair.

Despite a natural feeling that she was making herself

ridiculous, Lucinda executed to the best of her ability the gestures prescribed and tried to impart to them some colour of sincerity. As a matter of fact, she was singularly (and stupidly, she assured herself) anxious to deserve the further commendation of Mr. Culp's cameraman.

But it was at best a trying task and, when it came to posing for the close-up with a wall of blinding incandescence only a few feet from her eyes, a true ordeal. She was glad when it was over, and quite satisfied that she wouldn't care to repeat the experience, in spite of Mr. Timilty's encouraging "Pretty work, Mrs. Druce!"—whose source she could only surmise, since in her bedazzled vision everything remained a blur for some time after she had been delivered from the torture of the lights.

When at length that cloud of blindness cleared, Mr. Culp was nowhere to be seen. Nor did he show up again until the last test had been made and the party, once more shepherded by Mr. Lane, was on the point of leaving. Then Culp put in a hasty reappearance, coming from the direction of the dressing-rooms, nominated an hour for projecting the tests at the studio the next afternoon, bade a hearty good-bye to each of his guests, and insisted on escorting Lucinda to the door.

On the way, however, he managed to detain her and let the others draw ahead and out of hearing.

"Lis'n, Mrs. Druce," he abruptly volunteered: "Jack says your test's going to turn out great. That's just what he said—'like a million dollars.' And I been thinkin' . . . I was speakin' it over with Mrs. Culp in her dressing-room, d'y'see, and she's strong for it, says she'd be tickled to pieces. She's a wonderful little woman, Mrs. Culp is, she ain't never yet made any mistake about nobody, d'y'see, and she's took the biggest kind a fancy to you, and says tell you she's sure you'll never regret it——"

"Please, please, Mr. Culp! You are too good, and it

makes me most happy to know Mrs. Culp thinks well of me. But what," Lucinda laughed—"what *are* you talking about?"

"Why," said Culp in some surprise—"I was thinkin' maybe you'd like to try goin' into pitchers. You got everythin', d'y'see, looks and style and all, everythin' but experience; and that's somethin' you can get right here in this studio, workin' with Mrs. Culp. I got a good part for you in her next pitcher you could try out in, and——"

"It's awfully kind of you," Lucinda interrupted, "and I'm truly appreciative, Mr. Culp; but really I couldn't think of it."

"That right?" Culp seemed to be genuinely dashed. "'Sfunny," he observed dejectedly. "I s'pose you know best what you want to do, but it'd be great little experience for you, take it from me, Mrs. Druce."

"I'm sure it would."

"And I got a hunch you'd make good all the way. You've got things nobody else on the screen's got but my little woman, d'y'see, and it wouldn't be no time at all, maybe, before you'd be a star with your own company. I'll take care of that, you wouldn't have to worry about the money end of it at all, d'y'see——"

"But what if I don't *want* to be a motion-picture actress, Mr. Culp?"

"Well, of course, if you don't, that's different." He pondered gloomily this incomprehensible freak. "Lis'n," he suggested, brightening: "Tell you what, Mrs. Druce: you go home and think it over. You got all night and most of tomorrow—you won't be comin' here to look at the tests till five o'clock, d'y'see—and if you should want to change your mind, I stand back of all I said. All you got to do is say yes, and walk right into a nice part, fit you like a glove, in the next Alma Daley pitcher——"

"Seriously, Mr. Culp; if I should think it over for a month, my decision would be the same. But thank you ever so much—and please thank Mrs. Culp for me, too."

"Well," Culp said reluctantly, holding the street door, "if that's the way you feel about it . . . well, of course . . . G'dnight, Mrs. Druce, and pleas't'meet you."

The street was dark with a gentle darkness kind to eyes that still ached and smarted. And the frosty air was grateful to one coming from the close atmosphere of the studio, heavy with its composite smell of steam-heated paint and dust and flesh.

And crossing to her car, Lucinda experienced a vagary of vivid reminiscence. Just for an instant the clock was turned back for her a dozen years and more, she was again a little girl, a child bringing dazed eyes of dream from the warm and scented romance of a matinée, her thrilled perceptions groping mutinously toward reconciliation with the mysterious verities of streets mantled in blue twilight.

That passed too quickly, too soon she was Lucinda Druce once more, grown up and married, disillusioned . .

And with a shiver of pain Lucinda realized anew what the afternoon with its unsought boons of novelty and diversion had made her for hours on end forget, the secret dolour of her heart.

X

NOTWITHSTANDING that she drove directly home, or paused only to drop Daubeney at his club and the Lontaines at their hotel, it was after seven when Lucinda regained her rooms and was free at last to be once more her simple self, disembarrassed of the pride and circumstance that stayed the public personality of Mrs. Bellamy Druce.

Out of that social character she stepped as naturally as out of her gown, and with much the same sense of relief, in the easing of that tension to which she had been keyed all afternoon. Even at the studio, when interest in that quaint, ephemeral environment of other lives had rendered her forgetful of both self and the passage of time, subconsciously the strain of keeping up appearances had been still constant and made unremitting demands upon her stores of fortitude and nervous energy.

But she counted that cost not exorbitant, seeing the immunity it had purchased.

Dobbin alone had not been taken in . . .

She began to be a bit afraid of Dobbin. A danger signal she had the wit to apprehend in its right value. The woman who pretends to be afraid is setting a snare, but she who is truly afraid is herself already in the toils.

Dobbin saw too much, too deeply and clearly, and let her know it in a way that not only disarmed resentment but made her strangely willing to let him see more. She to whom reserve was as an article of faith! But if the woman in love with her husband knew she had no right to foster an intimacy, however innocent, with any other man, the woman harassed and half-distracted was too

hungry for sympathetic understanding not to be tempted when it offered, grateful for it and disinclined to pass it by.

This common life is unending quest for spiritual companionship—and love is the delusion that one has found it.

At twenty-six Lucinda was learning what life often takes twice that tale to teach, that though flesh must cleave unto flesh, the soul is lost unless it walk alone, creature and creator in one of its own bleak isolation.

In a moment of clear vision she promised herself to go warily with Dobbin . . .

And in the next, the telephone rang in the boudoir. Lucinda was in her bath, so her maid answered for her, and presently came to report: Mr. Druce had called up to say he wouldn't be dining at home that night, he was detained by a "conference."

Without looking, Lucinda knew that the woman's eyes were demure, her lips twitching.

Her just anger of that afternoon recurred with strength redoubled.

Not that she had been looking forward with any eagerness to the evening, the "quiet" dinner during which Bel would defiantly continue his tippling, the subsequent hours at the opera poisoned by forebodings, the homeward drive in antagonized silence, finally the trite old scene behind closed doors, of the piqued wife and the peccant husband, with its threadbare business of lies, aggrieved innocence, attempts at self-extenuation, ultimate collapse and confession, tears of penitence and empty promises . . . and her own spirit failing and in the end yielding to Bel's importunity, out of sheer weariness and want of hope.

It had been sad enough to have all that to anticipate. To be left in this fashion, at loose ends, not knowing what to expect, except the worst, was too much.

On leaving her bath Lucinda delayed only long enough to shrug into a dressing-gown before going to the telephone.

The voice that responded to her call said it thought Mr. Daubeney had just left the club, but if madame would hold the wire it would make sure.

She knew a moment of pure exasperation with the evident conspiracy of every circumstance in her despite.

Then the apparatus at her ear pronounced in crisp impatience: "Yes? This is Mr. Daubeney. Who wants him, please?"

"Oh, Dobbin! I'm so glad."

"You, Cinda!" The instantaneous change of tone would have been laughable if it hadn't been worse, the cause of a little flutter of forbidden delight. "Why, bless your soul! I'm glad I came back. They barely caught me at the door."

"Were you in a hurry to get on somewhere, Dobbin? I mean, am I detaining you?"

"Not a bit. Foolishly staggering out to try to find some place where the cooking was less perfunctory than here at the club."

"Sure you've got nothing important on?"

"If you must know, I was wondering what to do with a lonely evening."

"Then that makes two of us. Why can't we join forces and be miserable together?"

"With you? I'll do my best, but I don't promise . . . What's up?"

"Oh, everything, more or less. I'm in a villainous temper, Dobbin, and you'll be a dear if you'll come and dine with me—Bel's telephoned he won't be home—talk me into a decent humour and take me to the opera. And then—I don't care what we do!"

"Well, if you're half as reckless as you try to make out, you certainly need somebody to keep you from kicking over the traces."

"Then you will come?"

"Stop pretending to be stupid. When?"

"As soon as you like."

Later, seated at her dressing-table, adding those deft touches whose secret one woman in ten thousand knows, touches which lift an evening toilette out of the ruck of commonplace prettiness and render it wholly sorcerous, Lucinda caught in her mirror an odd look of dubious speculation on the face of the maid who waited by her shoulder.

Half an hour earlier such a look would have irritated, now its impertinence had no more effect than to make Lucinda smile illegibly at her image in the glass. What did it matter what questions might be taking form in that shallow mind? If Bel could afford to ignore the gossip of servants, that had its source in knowledge of his escapades no doubt infinitely more detailed and precise than she might ever hope or fear to gain—why, so could Bel's wife afford to go her own way and let this scandal-mongering world go hang.

Whether or not she could afford it, she meant hence-forward to make her own life—as Bel did, as everybody did—and an end to this drifting with the winds of forlorn and fading hopes. She was too young, too proud, too richly warmed by ardent wine of life, to accept without a murmur affronts and slights such as were now her daily portion, without a struggle reconcile herself to the estate of the outworn wife, tolerated mainly as an ornamental prop to the dignity of the house of Druce.

Bel should learn . . .

Poised lightly before the cheval-glass for the final inspection from head to foot, she perceived that she had never made herself lovelier for Bel; and Dobbin's spontaneous tribute as she entered the drawing-room agreeably confirmed this judgment.

"Heavens, Cinda! how do you do it?"

"Like the way I look tonight?"

"Like! It's unfair, it's premeditated cruelty, monstrous! You ought to be ashamed of yourself to look like that

to a man who's having a tough-enough fight with himself as it is."

"Fraud," Lucinda commented coolly. "You know you fancy yourself no end in the rôle of the luckless lover, you'd be scared silly if I gave you any reason to fear you'd ever have another part to play."

"Try me and see."

"No fear. I like you too well as you are. The part fits you to perfection, you do play it beautifully. Please don't ever stop: I love it."

"Imp! You need a good shaking. Don't you know you're flirting with me?"

"Do you mind?"

"Oh, no. Not if it amuses you. Not if you'll play fair."

"What do you call unfair?"

"For one thing, the way you've turned yourself out tonight."

"But only a moment ago you were leading me to believe I'd turned out at least passing fair." Lucinda affected a sigh. "And I was so happy to think I'd found favour!"

"I presume the intellectual level would be lowered if I were to say with What's-his-name, *'If she be not fair to me, what care I how fair she be'?"*

But Lucinda, in a pensive turn, shook her head and, eyeing him gravely, murmured: "I wonder . . . "

"What do you wonder, Cinda?"

"What you told me last night. . . Was it true?"

"That I had never stopped being in love with you? God help me! that was true enough, too true."

"Then I wonder if it's fair to you, and to me, the way we're going. I mean . . . " She faltered, with a sign of petulance. "Be patient with me, Dobbin. It isn't easy to figure some things out, you know. I mean, if you *are* in love with me——"

"Forget the 'if'."

"And Bel is not . . . Oh, no, he isn't! He's in love with the figure he cuts as my lord and master and the

dashing beau of every other pretty woman—not with me. Well! since you are and he isn't, and I'm discontented, and so fond of you, Dobbin: *is* it fair to either of us—because I'm bound to think of you, you know, and can't very well think of you dispassionately . . . " She concluded with a little shrug and a deprecating smile. "I don't know, Dobbin, I really don't know!"

"It isn't fair," he said—"of course—unless—"

She nodded seriously: "That's just it."

"I can only say, Cinda, whatever you do or say or think is right. It's all for you to decide."

"And I'm afraid I can't—not yet, at least. And when I do, I ought to warn you, the chances are I shan't decide the way you want me to."

"I know. But don't worry about me. I can take punishment, I've proved that, I think. So do what seems best to you. I'll faithfully follow your lead. I only want to play the game."

"And I . . . But we both want to be sure it's worth the scandal, don't we, Dobbin?"

"You joke about what's life and death to me!"

"I did it on purpose, old dear." Lucinda tapped his arm intimately with her fan. "Yes, I did. I don't want you to think, afterwards—if it turns out so you'd be tempted to think it—that I didn't, as you say, play fair. So it's only fair to let you find out as soon as possible that I'm an incurably frivolous person, Dobbin, vain, trifling, flippant, and—I'm afraid—a flirt."

"Not you!"

"Truly. Haven't I been letting you believe I made myself pretty tonight for your sake? It isn't true, at least not all true. It was for my own sake, really, because we're going to the opera, and everybody I know will see me there, and I want them to know what Bel neglects for his—other women!"

From the doorway an unctuous voice announced: "Dinner is served, madam."

XI

IN this newest phase of that day's protean gamut, in this temper of reckless yet cool determination to avenge her pride and coerce life into rendering up all that it had of late withheld, she put every curbing consideration behind, and resolutely set herself for that night at least to live only for the moment and wring from each its ultimate drop of pleasure, to be amused and to be amusing, to make fête and to be fêted.

Daubeney, wanting whom all her efforts must have been wasted, for whether she love him or not a woman needs a man in love with her at hand to be at her best—Dobbin was fairly dazzled, not so much by charms of person never more witching as by gay spirits the gayer for this sudden indulgence after long inhibition, by delicate audacity, wit swift, mutable and pungent, and passages of sheer bravura in Lucinda's exposition of the arts of coquetry.

The way she flirted with him was something shameful. For the matter of that, never a masculine moth blundered into the Druce box during the entr'actes but flopped dazedly away, wondering what the deuce was the matter with old Bellamy, had he gone absolutely balmy. But Dobbin in his capacity of cavalier servente suffered more than anybody, for she took an impish delight in luring him beyond his depth and then leaving him to flounder out as best he might.

"See here!" he reminded her indignantly as the curtain rose on the last act of *Louise*—"you promised to play fair." Lucinda arched mocking brows above round eyes. "Don't call this sort of thing keeping your word, do you?"

"Aren't you having a good time, Dobbin dear?" In the half-light of the box Lucinda leaned slightly toward him, and her delicious voice dripped sympathy. "I'm so sorry, I've been trying so hard not to bore you."

"I didn't say I was bored. I ain't—I'm being plagued by a heartless young she-devil that ought to be spanked and sent to bed. Damn it, Cinda! you not only ought to, you do know better. You know *I* take it seriously. But you—you're merely playing."

"But with fire—eh, Dobbin?"

"You know that, too."

"And you're warning me lest I get singed?" Lucinda contrived to look a little awed. "How thoughtful!"

"Don't make me out a greater dunce than I am."

"Meaning you don't think I'm in any danger of getting scorched, carrying on with you?"

"Worse luck!"

"Dobbin: have you been deceiving me, aren't you the least bit inflammable, after all?"

"You know jolly well I took fire years ago and have never since managed to get the conflagration under control. Isn't ladylike to put the bellows to flames you don't mean to quench."

"How appallingly technical! But you do sputter so entertainingly, Dobbin—burning under forced draught, I presume you'd say, with your passion for riding a metaphor till it flounders—I'm not sure I'd care to see you quenched; I hate to think of you being put out with me."

"You play with words precisely as you play with me."

"You think so? Well, perhaps, but—Dobbin—don't be too sure. Think how sad it would be if you were to find out, too late, you'd been mistaken, you'd meant more to me than words could tell, more than you knew."

Over this equivoque Dobbin shook a baffled head; and Lucinda laughed, glanced carelessly toward the stage to make sure that the act still was young, and offered to rise.

"Let's not stay any longer, Dobbin, or we'll be caught in the carriage jam. Let's trot along and have a good time."

"What's the next jump?"

"To the Palais Royal." Dobbin uttered an involuntary sound of dissent. "Why not? Julie Allingham wants us to join her party—says everybody goes there nowadays, and it's desperately rowdy and loads of fun—said to ask for her box and make ourselves at home if we got there before she did."

Mrs. Allingham was not one of Daubeney's favorites. A persevering body, with a genius for trading in last season's husband for the latest model, gifted likewise with incurable impudence and poverty of tact, both of which she was clever enough to veneer with vivacity and exploit as whimsical idiosyncrasies, she failed to measure up to his notion of the type of woman with whom Lucinda ought to be seen. He had been civil, no more, when she had danced into the box during the first entr'acte to make a public fuss over her darling Cindy, and then—engaged in small-talk by Julie's satellites, two sleek but otherwise featureless bloods—had failed to hear her invitation; and Julie had carefully forgotten to remind him of it on taking her leave.

So Daubeney wasn't pleased as he helped Lucinda with her wraps; and she read disgruntlement in his silence and constraint.

"You don't want to go, Dobbin? With me? Why?"

"With you, anywhere. But . . . " He mustered an unconvincing grin. "Oh, it's all right, of course. But Julie Allingham—you know—really!"

Lucinda's mouth tightened, for an instant her eyes held a sullen light. "How tiresome! You sound just like Bel. How often have I heard him use almost the same words: 'Julie Allingham—you know—really!' "

"Sorry," Dobbin said stiffly.

"What's the matter with Julie Allingham?" Lucinda demanded in a pet. "She's amusing, I like her."

"Then there's nothing more to be said."

"Oh, you're all alike, you, Bel, and all the rest of you!"

"Think so?"

"What if Julie has made history of a few husbands? At least, she's been honest about her changes of heart; when she tired of one, she got rid of him legally before taking on another. I call that more decent treatment than most men give their wives."

"Never having had a wife, can't argue."

"Oh, you sound more like Bel every minute! Do come along."

All at once her succès had evaporated into thin air, the flavour of it, that had been so sweet, had gone flat, like champagne too long uncorked. And all (she thought) because Dobbin with his stupid prejudices had reminded her of Bel!

It began to seem as if there might have been more truth than she had guessed in her assertion that men were all alike in their attitude toward women, toward their wives and toward—the others.

But if that were so (surely she wasn't the first to glimpse an immortal truth) why did women ever marry?

And why, in the name of reason! having once worried through the ordeal of having a husband, did any woman ever repeat an experiment which experience should have taught her was predestined to prove a failure?

She emerged from a brown study to find herself in the car, with Dobbin at her side watching her thoughtfully.

"Cross with me, Cinda?"

With an effort Lucinda shrugged out of her ill-humour.

"No, of course not. With myself, rather, for being a silly. Dobbin: you're a dear."

"I know," he agreed with comic complacence; "but it doesn't get me anywhere."

"You're not very flattering. I don't tell every man he's a dear."

"I'm wondering what the term means to you."

"It means a great deal."

"But what are the privileges and appurtenances of a dear's estate in your esteem? Does it carry the right to take liberties?"

"It might be worth your while to try and find out."

"Well . . . It's been a question in my mind ever since last night, and something you said just now . . . Is the inference justified, you and Druce aren't getting along too well?"

"Oh, do stop reminding me of Bel! I do so want to forget him for tonight."

"Then it's worse than I thought."

"It's worse than anybody thinks that doesn't know, Dobbin."

"So he hasn't changed . . . "

"How do you mean?"

"Why, I used to know Bellamy pretty well, pal around with him and that sort of thing . . . "

"No," said Lucinda slowly, eyes straight ahead—"if you mean what I mean, Bel hasn't changed."

"Then . . . " Daubeney found a hand which Lucinda resigned to his without a struggle. "As a man who truly loves you, dear, and always has, I think the right is mine to ask yet another question: What are you going to do?"

She shook her head dolefully: "I don't know yet."

"You said last night you were still in love . . . "

"Last night it was true."

"But today——?"

"I don't know."

"I won't ask you what has happened, Cinda——"

"Please don't. I don't want to talk about it."

"Only I must know one thing: Is there anyone else—with you, I mean?"

Lucinda met those devoted eyes honestly. "No, Dobbin, I'm sorry—not even you . . . "

"Then that's all right. No need for either of us to worry. You'll come through with flying colours. Only, don't do anything in haste, and right or wrong, count on me."

Lucinda gave his fingers a friendly pressure and disengaged her hand. "Dear Dobbin," she said gently.

The car was pulling in toward a corner.

XII

THOUGH they had left the Metropolitan long before the final curtain, on Broadway the midnight tidal bore of motor traffic was even then gathering way and volume, the first waves of after-theatre patrons were washing the doorsteps of those sturdy restaurants which had withstood the blast of Prohibition, the foyer of the Palais Royal already held a throng of some proportions. In this omnium-gatherum of confirmed New Yorkers and self-determined suburbicides, arrayed in every graduation of formal, semi-formal and informal dress, and drawn together by the happy coup of that year's press-agent in heralding the establishment as a favorite resort of what the Four Million still styles its Four Hundred, the women stood grouped in their wraps and wistfully watching their men-folk importune a headwaiter who was heroically holding the staircase against all-comers, passing only the fore-handed in the matter of reservations, and putting all others to ignominious rout with the standardized statement that there was not a table upstairs left untaken.

At first glance, the huge main room on the second story, with its serried semicircles of tables and its flamboyant colour scheme, seemed less frequented by clients than by waiters; but the influx of the former was constant, and when, shortly after Lucinda and Daubeney had been seated, a gang of incurable melomaniacs crashed, blared and whanged into a jazz fox-trot, the oval dance floor was quickly hidden by swaying couples.

For some minutes Lucinda sat looking out over without seeing these herded dancers, only aware of the

shifting swirl of colour and the hypnotic influence of savage music, her thoughts far from this decadent adaptation of jungle orgies which she had come to witness. And presently a smile began to flicker in the depths of her eyes.

"Oh!" she said, rousing when Daubeney uttered a note of interrogation—"I was thinking about this afternoon, remembering that funny little man moping and mowing in his magnificent delusion that he was conducting an orchestra."

"It was amusing, illuminating, too. One begins to understand why the movies are what they are. If I'm not mistaken, the author of that asinine exhibition is rated as one of the ablest directors in the business."

Lucinda quoted Mr. Lane's eulogy of King Laughlin.

"Well, there you are," Dobbin commented. "I presume genius must be humoured in its poses; even so, I saw nothing in Laughlin's directing to offset the silliness of his performance with the orchestra. I should say the business is poorly organized that permits men of his calibre, with so little sense of balance, to hold positions of absolute authority."

"You don't think Mr. Lane may have exaggerated Mr. Laughlin's importance——"

"Perhaps; though he was honoured with suspicious reverence by everybody present."

"Except Mr. Culp."

"Well, yes; Culp didn't seem so much overpowered. All the same, I noticed he didn't attempt to call Laughlin to order."

"But possibly the man *is* a genius. He seemed to know what he was about when he was showing them how to play that scene."

"I'll admit his grasp of primary mechanics; but the scene as he built it would have been ridiculous in the theatre."

"But it wasn't for a theatre, it was for the movies."

"Precisely my point. Why should motion-picture plays be less plausibly done than plays on the stage? The American theatre outgrew 'Nellie, the Beautiful Cloak Model' long before motion-pictures were seriously thought of; I mean, American audiences outgrew such trash. Yet today our movies are shaped on identically the lines of the popular melodrama that was laughed off the boards a generation ago. There's something wrong."

For some reason which Lucinda didn't stop to analyze, Daubeney's arguments stirred up a spirit of contentiousness.

"At all events, Mr. and Mrs. Culp seemed satisfied."

"Two people who have made a huge lot of money in an astonishingly short time: it isn't likely they'd be disposed to interfere with the system that enriched them, even allowing that they are sensible of its defects."

Lucinda caught herself frowning, then had the grace to laugh. "Can't make me believe they're lacking in artistic appreciation, Dobbin."

"Why not?"

"You don't know about the handsome offer Mr. Culp made me, with his wife's approval, just as we were going away."

It was Dobbin's turn to frown. "What kind of an offer?" he demanded shortly.

"To become a movie actress under the Culp banner, a sister-in-art to Alma Daley."

Daubeney ejaculated "What for?" with an expression of such utter dumbfounderment that Lucinda gasped with stifled mirth, then gave way to outright laughter.

"You're awfully funny, Dobbin! And they thought they were paying me a compliment."

But Daubeney would not see the fun of it.

"Do you mean to tell me that fellow Culp actually had the impertinence——"

"Oh, come!" Lucinda's amusement subsided. "It wasn't so bad as all that. Mr. Culp was most kind, at

least he meant to be. He said he, his wife and his cameraman—whose opinion he values more highly than any director's—all agreed I had shown a great deal of promise; and that, if I cared to try it on, he'd be glad to give me a good part in Miss Daley's next picture, and if I made good in that he'd form a company to star me."

"What rot!"

"Dobbin!"

"They're trying to work you——"

"But, my dear! isn't it barely possible Mr. Culp was sincere?"

"The thing's absurd on the face of it."

"Isn't that a matter of opinion?"

"It's a characteristic scheme to exploit you to Alma Daley's profit, to get her a lot of publicity on the cheap by letting the newspapers announce that Mrs. Bellamy Druce is going to act in her support."

"You won't admit, then," Lucinda persisted, nettled, "I may possibly have some latent ability as a motion-picture actress?"

"It doesn't matter. The proposition is a piece of—of preposterous impudence. What did you say to Culp?"

With countenance half averted, Lucinda said coldly: "My dear Dobbin: do you realize you're being rude?"

He was all contrition. "Oh, I'm sorry, Cinda, if I let my indignation on your behalf——"

"Gratuitous, you'll admit."

Daubeney reddened and swallowed hard. "I repeat: I didn't mean to offend. I apologize."

"Very well, Dobbin. Let's say no more about it."

But Lucinda's tone lacked friendliness, and the eyes were visibly sulky that, refusing to recognize his pleading, blindly surveyed the milling riot of dancers.

The silence that fell between them, like a curtain of muffling folds, was presently emphasized by an abrupt suspension of the music. When Daubeney could endure it no longer, he broke it with a question, the most impolitic

conceivable: "You didn't tell me what answer you gave Culp, Cinda?"

"Didn't I? But I'm sure it doesn't matter."

To himself, but half-aloud, Dobbin groaned: "Oh, the devil!"

But his manifest penitence earned him no more than a show of restoration to favour. The heart in Lucinda's bosom felt hot and hard and heavy with chagrin, she had banked so confidently on Dobbin's sympathy . . . He might be truly in love with her, she hadn't much doubt that he was, but the understanding she had counted on was denied her, the sense of security in his affection was no more. She felt cruelly bereft, more desolate than at any time since the breach with Bel had begun to seem unbridgeable.

It made no difference that she knew this feeling was unfair to both, that its childishness was clear to her whom it victimized the most. The day-long drain upon her emotions was inexorably exacting its due. With no more provocation than a sting of puerile pique, she had lost her temper, and all her efforts to retrieve it seemed unavailing. She felt broken, beaten, and very tired, she wanted to creep away to bed and cry herself asleep. Yet she must somehow find strength to hold up, or forfeit self-respect, she dared not confess the stuff of her spirit as mean as her heart's. She shook herself impatiently . . .

At the same time the band rewarded tireless hand-clapping by again breaking loose in blasts of delirious cacophony, and Lucinda pushed back her chair.

"Don't let's talk any more for a while, Dobbin—I'd rather dance."

Descending the several steps from the box level to the common, they threaded their way through a jam of tables to the fringe of the dance-mad mob, in whose closely-packed, rocking and surging rout considerable imagination and ingenuity were required to find room. Nevertheless Daubeney adroitly created a space where none had

been, and swinging smoothly away, they became one with and lost in the crush, their progress of necessity slow but amazingly easy, for Daubeney led with grace and skill.

Lucinda tried to forget her vexation in watching the faces of their fellow dancers and their styles, a diversion which seldom failed to flood her being, even when she was saddest, with sweetness and light.

All about them couples were practising every conceivable variety of step that could be executed to the rhythm beaten out by tireless drums whose timbre had all the grim and weirdly stimulating monotony of African tom-toms. Many contented themselves with a solemn, wellnigh ritualistic jigging by means of which they traversed the floor crab-wise, inch by inch. Others charged short distances at headlong speed, checked short, whirled madly, darted and swooped again with incredible agility, in a sort of corybantic frenzy. Still others favoured a tedious twirling, like amorous dervishes. Yet there were strangely few collisions . . .

Young things drifted by with faces buried in the shoulders of their partners, whether for shame or in somnambulism it was impossible to say. Those who are always with us, locked as in a death-grapple, ploughed doggedly along with tense mouths and rapt eyes. Couples whose mutual passion was stronger than feminine regard for the most carefully composed complexion, moved as one, her cheek glued to his. Portly and bedizened dowagers wore set smiles on lips that moved to inaudible counting, and their paid partners, professional young male dancers, that patient yet abstracted expression that tells of bandaged, swollen feet. Little girls who apparently should have been at home, getting a good night's rest in preparation for a long school-day tomorrow, lifted up unformed, flower faces breathlessly to the hard, mature faces of the vulpine men who held them.

Lucinda saw those to whom this was adventure, those to whom it was romance, those to whom it was physical

agony, and those to whom it was a source of soul-destroying ennui. She smelt the breath of sticky bodies and the cloying perfumes in which the optimistic reposed mistaken faith.

And all her movements were, like theirs, measured by the swing of that giggling, grunting, whistling, clanging, moaning band . . .

Suddenly she knew she had had enough.

"It's too crowded," she told Dobbin; and he nodded agreement. "Shall we stop when we get around to our box?"

Without warning more than a smothered cry of alarm in a woman's voice, Lucinda was struck by a wildly careering body with such force that she lost footing altogether and must have fallen but for Dobbin, who instantly tightened his hold and braced himself against the dead drag of her weight, this though the shock of collision almost carried him off his own feet.

Simultaneously the floor shook with the impact of two heavy falls. And clinging to Dobbin, a little dazed, Lucinda saw a strikingly pretty young woman, stunningly undressed, sprawling at her feet, and at a yard's distance a man in similar plight.

Derisive cackles and guffaws of clowns broke out on all sides, a space was cleared round the unfortunates.

"Are you all right, Cinda?" Dobbin asked. She nodded and tried to smile. "Sure you're not hurt?"

She shook her head vigorously, and by way of proof stood out of his arms, but swayed dizzily and, with a little apologetic laugh, caught at one of them again.

"All right," Dobbin said hastily. "Let's get out of this."

"No—wait!" Lucinda insisted. "Perhaps she's hurt."

She brushed his arm aside, only to discover that the overthrown woman had regained her feet, and now stood watching her partner in shrewish fury as, grinning foolishly, he scrambled up.

"You clumsy dumb-bell!" she stormed in a rasping

voice that must have carried clearly half across the room. "I hope to Gawd I got enough sense not to dance with you again when you're pickled!"

And catching her first glimpse of the man's crimson face, Lucinda yielded all at once to Daubeney's insistence.

But she never quite knew how they got back to their table.

XIII

BUT even with the three sides of the box affording their false show of privacy, it never entered Lucinda's head to sit down and pretend nothing had happened, the instinct to fly at once from this theatre of disgrace was still predominant. Only for a moment she rested standing, while her eyes, darkly dilate, sought Daubeney's, which held a look of such heart-broken regret that they won a compassionate smile even in her hour of affliction, and somehow helped Lucinda pull together the rent and draggled garment of her dignity.

"At least," she said quietly, "Julie Allingham isn't here —thank Heaven for that! You saw him, of course?"

Dobbin made a vague gesture of sympathy: "Frightfully sorry . . . "

Lucinda shrugged. "Don't be. It wasn't your fault, it was I who insisted on coming here."

Her gaze veered to the floor; but the dancers had already swarmed over and abolished the break in their ranks, and though she looked beyond the sea of bobbing heads, to right and left, reviewing all she could see of the room, Bellamy was nowhere in sight.

"I presume we couldn't have been mistaken . . . " Dobbin ventured half-heartedly.

"No: it was Bel."

"Hoped we might have been misled by a resemblance. Somehow the poor devil didn't look quite like Bellamy."

"He's apt to look not quite like himself when he is— as the pretty lady with him so delicately put it—'pickled.' "

"Think he knew you?"

"Oh, yes; I saw him look directly at me just before

we turned away." Lucinda took up her wrap. "If you'll help me with this, Dobbin, I think I'd like to go."

"Afraid I'll have to ask you to wait a minute or two. I've got these to pay for . . . " Daubeney indicated the untasted glasses of lemonade they had ordered. "I've sent for our waiter."

"Then if you don't mind, I'll go ahead. Let me have the carriage check, and I'll wait in the car."

Daubeney surrendered the pasteboard slip, and Lucinda went out. The passageway behind the boxes enabled her to gain the entrance without running the gauntlet of the floor, and she descended the stairs with her head slightly lowered, in panic hope that she might thereby escape recognition if bad luck would have it that she must meet Julie Allingham. But she was spared that misfortune.

At the street door she gave the attendant the carriage-check together with a coin. "And hurry, please!" The man saluted respectfully and vanished.

She waited restlessly just inside the glass doors till the reflection that every second was making an encounter with the Allingham woman more certain drove her out to the street; a move which she found immediate reason to repent. Only a few feet away Bellamy stood with an affectionate arm round the shoulder of the door-porter, greatly to the seeming embarrassment of that monumental personage and the amusement of the street. A knot of grinning bystanders had already begun to gather.

Bel's derby was perilously perched, his overcoat, donned in haste, was poorly settled on his shoulders, though he had contrived to worry two buttons through the wrong buttonholes, and he was explaining, unconsciously to everybody within a wide radius, the personal service he required in return for the ten-dollar bill which he was waving beneath the porter's nose.

"Now, lishn, Jim . . . Do' mind my callin' you Jim, do you, ol' scout? . . . Get thish straight: M'wife's here t'night 'nd I don' want her know I wash here,

shee? If she don' know I wash here, she's got nothin' on me, nothin' 'tall, shee? So you don' know me, you never heard of me, shee?"

"Yes, Mr. Druce."

" 'Caush it's this way: if she's got nothin' on me, I'm all right, 'nd I got somethin' on her. Believe me, Jim, I got good 'nd plenty on her t'night. She's here with man I know and don' like, man I got no ush for at all—shee?—no ush whatever. Ain't that limit, jush like woman? Insist you gotta walk chalk-mark, but minute your back'sh turned, what they do? Go off on private lil parties all their own, that'sh sort of thing they do! . . . "

Panting and sick with mortification, Lucinda turned from the sound of that babbling voice of a fool—and heard her own name pronounced.

"The car is here, Mrs. Druce."

In a wild stare she identified the face of her chauffeur, saw that he understood the situation and was anxious to be helpful.

"Wait," she quavered.

And then by a miracle of will-power she managed to master her nerves and, putting aside her horror and humiliation, took thought quickly and clearly.

"All I wan' you to do ish remember, if Mishish Druce asks if you've seen me, you never heard of me, don' know me 'tall—shee, Jim, shee what I mean?"

As Lucinda drew near the porter must have guessed who she was, for he spoke to Bellamy in a low voice, and the latter swung round with startled eyes and a dropping jaw. She closed her fingers on his wrist and put all her strength into their grasp.

"Come, Bel," she said clearly and not unkindly. "Please don't keep me waiting. The car is here, we're going home."

For a moment the balance wavered, then Bel's eyes fell, and she knew she had won.

"Oh, a'right," he mumbled with strange docility.

Didn' know you were waitin', Linda. Get ri' in the car—be with you in jush a minute."

"No," she said firmly—"you're coming with me now."

She drew him away. He yielded without remonstrance, permitted her to lead him to the door of the car, stumbled in on his knees, and crawled up to the seat. Lucinda followed, the door closed behind her with a clap sweeter than music in her hearing, and with purring gears the car shot out of range of those leering faces.

Lucinda had forgotten Dobbin as utterly as if she had never known him.

Bellamy lay in a loose slouch, breathing heavily. The passing lights revealed the stupidity of his congested features. His eyes were half-closed, he seemed to be asleep.

Cringing as far away from him as she could, Lucinda dug nails into her palms to keep from giving over body and mind to the dominion of hysteria. She saw nothing of the streets through which they passed, knew no thought other than to preserve her self-control.

When at length the car stopped, she jumped out and, leaving Bellamy to the care of the chauffeur and footman, ran up to her room. The maid waiting there she dismissed for the night in half a dozen words whose decision sent the woman from her in astonishment.

Alone, her first move was to secure the door communicating with Bel's rooms. Then she threw herself upon the bed and lay listening to the noise on the stairway of voices and stumbling feet. The door between the hall and Bel's rooms banged. She heard him maundering incoherently to his valet for a time, a long time; the valet seemed to be trying to make him listen to reason and failing in the end. The neck of a decanter chattered against the rim of a glass, there was a lull in the murmur of voices, then a thick cry and the thud of a fall. After that the quiet was little disturbed by the valet's labours with the body of the drunkard. Eventually the man went

out and closed the door. In the subsequent silence the clock downstairs chimed twelve.

Lucinda rose then, and changed to her simplest street suit.

For half an hour or so she was busy at desk and dressing-table, packing a checque book and her jewels with other belongings in a small hand-bag. She did not falter once or waste a single move through indecision. Indeed, it did not once occur to her that there was anything to be done but what she meant to do.

Shortly after one o'clock she left Bel snoring, crept down the stairs and with infinite stealth let herself out to the street.

Nobody saw her go, neither did she hesitate as she turned her back upon the home that had till then held for her every precious thing in life.

XIV

SPURRED by irrational fear lest Bellamy wake up, discover her flight, and give chase, Lucinda made in haste for Fifth avenue; but had not taken half a dozen steps when a cab slid up to the curb by her side, its driver with two fingers to his cap soliciting a fare. He seemed Heaven-sent. Lucinda breathed the first address that came to mind—"Grand Central, please"—hopped in, and shrank fearfully away from the windows.

On second thought, the destination she had named seemed a sensible choice. Any one of the several hotels which tapped the railroad terminal by subway would take her in for the night. In the morning she would be better able to debate her next step. At present she felt hopelessly incapable of consecutive thought.

At the station a negro porter with a red cap opened the cab door and took possession of her single piece of luggage, and when she had paid off the taxi and looked to him in indecision, prompted her with: "What train was yo' wishin' to tek, ma'm?"

An instant later Lucinda was wondering why she had replied: "The first train for Chicago, please." She knew no reason why she should have named Chicago rather than any other city where she was unknown and where, consequently, she might count on being free to think things out in her own time and fashion.

"Ain't no Chicago train befo' eight-fo'ty-five tomorrow mawnin', ma'm."

"Very well. I'll go to a hotel for tonight."

"Yes'm. W'ich hotel, Commodo', Biltmo', Belmont?"

Lucinda settled on the Commodore, because it was the

largest of the three and she would be lost in the multitude of its patrons.

She registered as *Mrs. L. Druce, Chicago,* and, before proceeding to her room, arranged to have the head porter purchase her ticket and reservation the first thing in the morning.

Some hours later she was awakened by a cramp in one of her arms and found that she had fallen asleep while sitting on the edge of her bed. In a daze she finished undressing, and sleep again overwhelmed her like a dense, warm, obliterating cloud.

It seemed but a minute or two before she was being scolded awake by the shrewish tongue of the telephone by the head of the bed, to hear a dispassionate voice recite the information that it was seven o'clock, the hour at which she had asked to be called.

She felt as if she had not slept at all.

Again, in the train, the aching misery of heart and mind could not prevent her nodding and drowsing all morning long; and after a meal of railroad food by way of luncheon, she gave up trying to stave off the needs of a highly organized nature fatigued by inordinate strains, called the porter, had him make up the lower berth in her drawing-room, and went to bed.

In the neighborhood of midnight she woke up to discover, first by peering out under the edge of the window-shade at concrete platforms bleakly blue and bare in the glare of unseen lamps, then by consulting a time-table, that the train was in Cleveland.

As it pulled out again, she resigned herself to the inescapable. Rested, her mind clear and active, and with nothing to do but think for eight hours more, she must go down into the hell appointed.

Nor was she spared any portion of its torments. Successively and in concert, vanity wounded to the quick, sickening self-pity, and implacable, grinding regret laid hold on her heart and soul and worried them till she had to

bury her face in the pillow and sink her teeth into it to keep from screaming.

It was cruel enough to have loved and lost, but to have lost and still to love seemed punishment intolerable. The shameful knowledge that body and spirit still hungered for the man who had served both so shabbily ate into her amour-propre like a corrosive acid.

To her agonized imagination she figured in the semblance of a leaf harassed by that high wind of fatality which latterly had swept into and through her life with Bel, driving them asunder; a leaf torn from the homely branch that had given it life and nurtured it, a leaf hunted helplessly into strange ways and corners, even now being hounded on and on . . . And to what end? . . .

She burned with resentment of her persecution by those unknown powers whose ill-will she had not wittingly done anything to invite, she writhed in the exasperation bred of her impotence to placate them or withstand their oppression.

A lull fell at last in the transports of her passion, she lay quite still, and her mind too grew calm in awareness of the quiet, resolute mustering of all her forces to wrest from malicious chance and circumstance the right to live a life of her own choosing; as if her soul, drawing strength from new-found knowledge of its indestructible integrity, lifted up its head and with calm eyes challenged Fate.

Her paroxysms were now spent and ended, the past had been put definitely behind her, it was with the future alone that she had need to be concerned.

She addressed herself to the task of taking stock of Lucinda Druce, the woman all alone, her condition and resources, and of trying to map out for her a new and independent existence that would prove somehow livable.

If she had not succeeded in this undertaking when the train breathed its last weary puffs under the echoing glass canopy of the La Salle Street station, success was not

forfeited, it was but deferred. There was so much to be taken into consideration, she could not yet see further than tomorrow, if so far. Certain immediate steps were indicated to her intelligence as requisite and reasonable; whither they would lead she could by no means guess.

Bred on the Atlantic seaboard, she knew more of Europe than of the United States west of the Alleghenies. Chicago to her was a city that once had burned to the ground because a cow kicked over a lighted lamp; a city famous for great winds, something known as "the Loop," something hardly less problematic called "stockyards." The name of a hotel, too, the Blackstone, had found lodgment in her memory.

The short drive in a yellow taxicab from the station to the hotel through a labyrinth of back streets a-brawl with traffic, failed to register any impressions other than of cobblestones, blasphemous truck drivers, street-cars pounding and clanging, begrimed buildings, endless columns of self-absorbed footfarers. The hotel itself seemed in grateful contrast, it might have been one of her own New York. Only the view from her rooms, many stories above the street, of a public park bleached, frost-bitten, desolate, and slashed by a black railroad cutting, and beyond this a vast expanse of tumbled waters, slate-grey flecked with white, blending with a grim grey sky, drove home the fact that her first uncertain gropings toward a new life were to be framed in a foreign, and to her perceptions an unfriendly, environment.

But she turned from the window with the light of battle in her eyes. Nature was wasting its effects, she was not to be disheartened by an ill-dispositioned day.

After breakfast she went out to do a little necessary shopping, and spent the morning and most of her cash in hand as well in department stores which she was unreasonably surprised to find differed not materially from establishments of the same character in the East, save in

the crowds that thronged them, drab rivers of people persistently strange in her sight.

But the experience served to remind her that she had more material problems to solve than those provided by her inner life. She found herself running short of ready money and with a checque-book valueless unless she were willing to prove her identity as the wife of Bellamy Druce.

She thought of telegraphing old Harford Willis, who had been her father's close friend, legal adviser, and executor of his estate, as he was today steward of Lucinda's. But he could not be expected to understand a peremptory demand for money in Lucinda's name, from a city which he had no reason to believe she had ever even thought of visiting, without explanations too lengthy and intimate for transmission by telegraph. The alternative was to write him, and that meant a long, full letter, for (Lucinda suddenly discovered) Willis was the one man in the world whom she could safely and freely confide in, consult and trust.

She did not even remember Dobbin's pretensions to such standing with her. In the first twenty-four hours of her flight from Bellamy she had not thought of Daubeney once. Now, when she thought of him at all, it was as of some revenant of kindly countenance from a half-forgotten dream.

She spent most of the afternoon composing her letter and despatched it after dinner, a rather formidable manuscript under a special delivery stamp.

After that there was nothing to do but fold her hands and commend her soul to patience.

Three eventless days dropped out of her history. The dreary weather held, there was rain and snow, gales like famished banshees pounded and yammered at the hotel windows. She seldom ventured into the streets, even for exercise. She read a great many novels purchased at the hotel news-stand, or pretended to, for her mind refused as a general thing to travel with the lines of print. Her

most exciting diversion lay in reviewing and enlarging the list of things she meant to buy as soon as she was able. And one afternoon she went to see Alma Daley in her latest production (not "The Girl in the Dark," of course, it was too soon for that) at a motion-picture theatre near the hotel.

She came away confirmed in her belief that Miss Daley was an unusually attractive and capable young mistress of pantomime. But the picture-play itself had seemed frightfully dull stuff. Indeed, Lucinda had experienced considerable difficulty in following its thread of plot, and sat it out only because of her personal interest in the actress.

Returning to her rooms possessed by memories of that afternoon she had spent at the studios of Culp Cinemas Inc., the last afternoon of her life as Bellamy's wife, she wondered, not with any great interest, how her tests had turned out, what the others, Dobbin and Jean and Nelly, and Fanny Lontaine and her husband, had thought of them; whether any one had known or guessed the reason for her absence, when they had gathered in Culp's projection-room for the showing; whether any one had cared.

Dobbin had cared, of course. At least, Dobbin had believed he cared. So had Lucinda, then . . .

How long ago it seemed!

XV

INEXPRESSIBLY SHOCKED ARRIVING TOMORROW WILL CALL ON YOU TEN A M MEANWHILE BANK OF MICHIGAN WILL SUPPLY YOU WITH FUNDS IN ANY AMOUNT YOU MAY REQUIRE IF YOU WILL BE PLEASED TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF TO MR. SOUTHARD THERE.

The author of this telegram, which was delivered on the morning of Lucinda's fifth day in Chicago, was punctual to the minute of his appointment; otherwise he would hardly have been the rectilinear gentleman of the frock-coat school that he was.

Notwithstanding that Harford Willis was pledged to a code of morals and manners vinted in the early Eighteen-Eighties, and so implacably antagonistic to the general trend of present-day thought on the divorce question, his great affection for Lucinda predisposed him to allow that the course she had taken with Bellamy had been the only one his conduct had left open to her.

On the other hand he was unhappily unable to hide the disconcertion inspired by the simple gladness of her greeting, the spontaniety of which was in such marked contrast to his own well-composed demeanour of honorary pall-bearer at a fashionable funeral.

"If you only knew how good it is to see a friendly face for the first time in a whole week!"

"But, my dear Lucinda," Willis intoned deliberately in his well-modulated voice of a public speaker, "I must say you seem to be bearing up remarkably well, all things considered, re-mark-ably well."

"I've stopped howling and drumming the floor with my heels," Lucinda admitted—"if that's what you mean. When I found it didn't do any good, I gave it up, and I've felt more cheerful ever since."

"Cheerful!" Willis repeated in a sepulchral voice.

"More like an average human being who's been horribly hurt but who can't see why life should be counted a total loss for all that; less like the wronged wife in a movie, mugging at a camera."

"But, my poor child! how you must have suffered."

"Let's not talk about that, please," Lucinda begged. "It only makes me vindictive to remember; and I don't want to feel that way about Bel, I don't want to be unjust. It's bad enough to have to be just."

"Must you?" Willis asked, shaking a commiserative head.

"Yes." Lucinda met his skeptical old eyes with eyes of clear candour. "Absolutely," she added with a finality not to be discredited.

Willis sighed heavily, released her hand, sat down, and meticulously adjusted the knees of striped grey trousers.

"I will confess I had hoped to find you of another mind."

"I'm sorry. Please don't think me hard or unforgiving, but . . . I've had plenty of time to mull things over, you know; and *I* know I couldn't consider going back to Bel, no matter what he might be ready to promise. Bel can't keep a promise, not that kind, at least."

"I feel sure you wrong him there; it's true I don't know your husband as well as I know you, my dear, but I assure you that amongst men he has the reputation of a man of honour."

"Man of honour meaning, I presume, one who won't cheat another man but will cheat a woman."

"Oh, come! that's a bit sweeping."

"The men who know Bel know how he's been treating me—all New York knows! If he treated them as treach-

erously, would they call him a man of honour?" Willis gave a vague gesture of deprecation, and Lucinda laughed a little, but not in mirth. "Women are at least more honest among themselves; if a woman knows another who isn't playing fair with her husband, she either keeps quiet about it or calls her a cat, and lets it go at that—she doesn't call her a woman of honour."

"You don't think it would be worth while," Willis suggested as one in duty bound, "to forgive Bellamy, give him another chance?"

"I don't know I've got anything to forgive him, Mr. Willis. Bel did the best he could. And that's the whole trouble. Why should I forgive him for being true to himself? It's myself I can't forgive, because I was silly enough to let him go on as long as I did, making me a laughing-stock . . . Besides, I'm not so sure it's good for us to be forgiven our sins; we're all such vain creatures, we're too apt to take forgiveness as a license to misbehave still more. . . . Don't you see?"

"I see you are beginning to formulate a philosophy of life."

"Isn't it about time?"

"You will need it, my dear, if you mean to fight this out alone. Philosophy is good medicine only for lonely hearts. The others it merely hardens."

Lucinda eyed Willis sharply. "Bel has been to see you."

"He looked me up," Willis admitted in mild surprise, "two days after your disappearance, thinking you might have communicated with me. Of course, I could tell him nothing. But how did you know——?"

"That suggestion, the underlying thought that I might not be intending to fight out my fight alone—that originated with Bel, didn't it?"

"Well!" Willis stammered, trying to smile disarmingly —"I confess——"

"It wasn't enough, of course, that I should have found

Bel out for the dozenth time, there had to be a lover in *my* background to account for my leaving *him!* Did he mention any name?"

Willis made a negative sign. "Bellamy didn't imply —he merely said he was afraid——"

"It doesn't matter. What else did he have to say?"

"He seemed most remorseful——"

"I know how remorseful Bel can seem."

"And determined——"

"In what way?"

"To find you——"

"He'd only be wasting his time."

"He spoke of employing detectives to trace you, when I assured him I knew nothing of your whereabouts and that when—and if—I did hear from you, I would necessarily be guided by your wishes."

"Thank you," said Lucinda. "It wouldn't do Bel any good to see me; it would only irritate him to find I could hold out against a plea he made in person."

"I understand," Willis agreed; and then with a quizzical look: "You seem to know your own mind, young woman; so I shan't attempt to advise you. But would you mind telling me what you have decided to do?"

"I shall divorce Bel, of course."

"You don't think it might be advisable to wait a while? It makes me very sad to think of you in relation to divorce proceedings. But then, of course, I belong to a generation that viewed divorce in a different light." Lucinda was silent. "Ah, well!" Willis sighed, and renounced hope then and there—"if you must, you must, I presume; and I will do my best to serve your wishes, my dear. Only tell me how . . . "

"Why, naturally, I want to get it over with as quickly and quietly as possible, with the minimum amount of public scandal."

"Then you won't sue in New York State."

"Why not?"

"Its laws recognize only one ground for absolute divorce."

"No," Lucinda concluded thoughtfully; "I'd rather not drag others into the case, I'd rather get my freedom, if I can, without making anybody unhappy, more than us two."

"The laws of the State of Nevada are most liberal. But it would be necessary for you to establish a legal residence by living in Reno for, I believe, six months."

"I suppose that's unavoidable."

"I will look up the most reputable firm of lawyers there, and recommend you to them. If you find yourself in need of other advice, write or telegraph me and I will come out to confer with you."

"I hope I won't have to impose on your kindness to that extent."

Willis blinked, removed the gold-rimmed pince-nez of his fading day, and polished the lenses with a silk handkerchief.

"I should not consider it an imposition, but a privilege, Lucinda. I can think of nothing I wouldn't do for your father's daughter, or for yours, if you had one."

"Thank God I haven't!"

"I'm afraid I can't say Amen to that. But then, as I have already remarked, I am in many respects a survival, an interesting one, I trust, but a survival none the less, of a conservative-minded generation."

He replaced the glasses.

"Is there anything else, my dear? If so, we can take it up over our luncheon. That is to say, I am hoping you will find it convenient and agreeable to lunch with me today."

Bowing punctilious acknowledgment of Lucinda's acceptance, he sat back and joined the fingers of both hands at his chin. "And now," he pursued—"if you don't mind satisfying an inquisitive old man—I would very much like

to know what you propose to do with your freedom, when you get it."

Lucinda jumped up and turned away with a quaver of desolation.

"Ah, I wish you hadn't asked me! That's what I'm trying all the time to forget——"

"I thought so."

"The emptiness to come! . . . What *can* a woman do to round out her life when she's lost her husband and is fit for nothing but to be a wife?"

"She can find another husband. Many do."

"Marry again!" A violent movement of Lucinda's hands abolished the thought. "Never that! I'm through with love for good and all."

"No doubt," agreed the student of law and life. "But are you sure that love is through with you?"

XVI

WILLIS left for New York on a late afternoon train; and when Lucinda had said good-bye to him at the station, she felt as if she had parted with her one real friend in all the world.

Nevertheless it had done her good to see and talk with him, and it was in a courageous if not altogether a cheerful temper that she bade the driver of her taxi stop at the Consolidated Ticket Office on the way back to the Blackstone.

But a set-back threatened immediately when she applied for transportation and a drawing-room through to Reno. The Winter stampede of California tourists was in full westward swing, she learned, and not only was every drawing-room and compartment sold for the next fortnight on the trains of the Union Pacific system, the direct route to Reno, but she would have to wait several days even if she were willing to content herself with an upper berth.

The appalled expression with which she contemplated this alternative, and tried to make up her mind which would be worse, to nurse her loneliness in Chicago for another two weeks, or condemn herself for three days to the promiscuous indecency of open sleeping-car conditions, enlisted the sympathies of the susceptible if none too brilliant clerk who had dashed her hopes; and promising to see what he could do, he busied himself mysteriously with a battery of telephones, and presently returned in a glow of vicarious delight, to announce that he had arranged to book Lucinda through to San Francisco via the

Santa Fé system, with a section all to herself on the California Limited leaving the next night.

To Lucinda's objection that she didn't want to go to San Francisco, she wanted to go to Reno, he explained, and produced bewildering maps and time-tables to prove his contention, that she would not only travel in more comfort but would actually save time by going out immediately via the Santa Fé and returning eastward from San Francisco to Reno, a comparatively insignificant trip of some eleven hours.

To clinch the matter he offered to telegraph for a drawing-room reservation to Reno on the first train to leave San Francisco after her arrival. And Lucinda feebly humoured his anxiety to be of service to a pretty lady.

Perhaps it was just as well, after all, that she wouldn't be able to shut herself up on the train and mope alone, perhaps it would take her out of herself a bit to be thrown into indiscriminate association with fellow-travellers.

Among the first purchases she had made after calling at the Bank of Michigan were a wardrobe trunk and a fitted dressing-case. And when the trunk had been checked and trundled away by a porter, the next morning, Lucinda had a long afternoon to fill in, and accomplished this by attending a matinée.

Returning to the hotel about five, she was approaching the elevators when, midway in the foyer, she stopped stock still, even her heart and lungs momentarily refusing their office, transfixed by the sight of Bellamy standing at the registry desk, in earnest consultation with one of the clerks.

Apparently Bellamy had just learned what he wanted to know; Lucinda recognized the backward jerk of the head that was an unfailing sign of gratification in him, and saw him turn away from the desk. Galvanized, she hurled herself toward one of the elevator shafts, the gate to which was even then being closed. Luck and agility enabled her to slip through before the gate clanged and the

car shot upward—the passengers eyeing Lucinda in amusement or amazement or both, the operator treating her to a dark overshoulder scowl.

But she didn't care, her recklessness had purchased her a respite, provisional and short-lived though it might prove; and when the elevator had discharged its other passengers on floors below hers, she found a richly compensating tip for the attendant.

"Sorry if I frightened you," she apologized. "There was somebody in the lobby I didn't want to see me, and I had to act quickly."

"'Sall right, ma'am," the boy grumbled, pocketing the money. "Only yeh don' wanta count on gettin' away with that sort of thing often, yeh might of got yehself killed."

"I'll be more careful," Lucinda promised humbly, as the car stopped to let her off. "And will you do something for me, please: tell the management I'd like my bill sent up to my room at once, and that, if anybody asks for me, I'm not in."

"Sure I will, ma'm."

When she entered her room the telephone was calling. She locked the door; and for as long as it continued to ring, which it did for upwards of five minutes with brief rests in discouragement, Lucinda did not move or cease to regard it in frightened fascination, as if it were a thing of malign intelligence which all her wit and ingenuity would hardly serve to frustrate. At length it gave it up as a bad job, and she sank limply into a chair near the door, and there remained stirless, trying to master demoralized nerves, trying to think, till a knock brought her to her feet in a flutter.

She had trouble finding voice enough to be heard through the door: "Who is it?"

"Your bill, ma'm."

Not Bel's voice. Still it might be a trick. When she forced herself to turn key and knob, she more than half

expected to see her husband. But the bellboy was alone. Lucinda took the bill and was counting out the money, when the telephone began to trill again.

"Take those bags, please," she said, indicating the new dressing-case and the bag which she had brought from New York, "put them in a taxi at the door, and hold it till I come down. I shan't be long."

Alone, she answered the telephone.

"Hello? That you, Linda? It's I, Bel."

"Y-yes, I—I know."

"Thank God, I've found you! See here: I'm coming up, if you don't mind. All right?"

"Yes, Bellamy—it—it's all right."

Running out into the hall, she found the stairs and pelted up two flights. One of the elevators was rising. It stopped two floors below, then came on up in response to her ring. The attendant whom she had tipped so well was in charge, and there was nobody else in the car.

"Did you let somebody out at my floor?"

"Yes, ma'm, gempman."

"Take me down, please, without stopping."

The car dropped with sickening rapidity, and she stepped out into the foyer, but only to realize in consternation the flat futility of her strategem when Bel placed himself before her, blocking the way to the street.

Her heart checked and raced, she was oddly at once aghast and elated. She couldn't be sorry her ruse had failed, subconsciously she had wanted all along to see Bel, just for a minute, face to face, with her own eyes to see how he looked, how her flight had affected him, whether ill or well.

Though he seemed to be quite himself, neither under the influence of nor suffering from recent indulgence in drink, his face looked thinner, his eyes a trifle more deeply set in his head; and there was new firmness in the set of his mouth.

In this new guise, the old appeal was strong. For a space of several beats her heart misgave her . . .

In a matter-of-course way Bel offered a hand, and Lucinda touched it mechanically.

"Sorry, Linda, if I disappointed you, but thought I recognized your hand-bag being carried to the door, and waited for this car to come down on the off-chance . . ."

"I see," she articulated with an effort.

"Hope you're not angry . . . " Bel smiled as if he read her weakness, smiled with a fatal trace of over-confidence. "Had to see you, couldn't let you get away without giving me a hearing, after all the trouble I've had finding you."

"It's too late, I'm afraid—this isn't the place, either, to discuss such matters. Besides, I'm in a great hurry."

"You can give me a few minutes, surely. If you'll step into the reception-room with me for a minute——"

"Bel: I tell you it's too late."

Struggling to keep his temper, Bel caught his underlip between his teeth, while Lucinda cast witlessly about her for some way of escape. None offered. But she noticed that a young man standing nearby was observing them with keen interest, a rather brilliantly good-looking young man, brilliantly well dressed. As Lucinda's glance rested transiently on him, his face brightened with a tentative smile, and she thought he started as if he were impulsively minded to approach. If so, he reconsidered instantly. With a frown she looked back to Bel.

He made a gesture of entreaty. "You can't put me off like this, Linda, when I've come so far, gone through so much——"

"I can because I must, Bel—I will."

"No, by God! you can't and shan't!"

He caught her arm lightly as she tried to pass. She stopped, her face hardening.

"Are you going to make another scene, publicly disgrace me again even when sober?"

His hand dropped to his side. Lucinda began to walk rapidly toward the street entrance, but had taken few steps when Bellamy ranged alongside.

"Linda: you've *got* to listen to me! There's something I've got to tell you——"

"Then go back to New York and tell it to Harford Willis. If it's anything I want to hear, he will write me."

"Harford Willis! What's he—!" The significance of her words seemed to come to Bel all at once. "You don't mean to say you're going—! You can't be meaning to—!" With a long stride Bel swung in front of her again at the head of the stairs to the street. "At least, tell me what you mean to do."

"I mean to go to Reno, as soon as you let me pass."

Bellamy's eyes narrowed as if in physical pain. He threw out a hand of inarticulate protest, and let it fall in despair. Subduing a strong desire to bolt for it, Lucinda began to descend at a pace not inconsistent with dignity. At the same time, sensitiveness to the situation, the feeling that they had been playing a scene of intimate domestic drama for the edification of an entire hotel, made her aware that the young man whose interest had first manifested near the elevators had followed and was now standing at the head of the steps, over across from Bellamy.

Pushing through the door, she breathed thankfully the stinging winter air. The canopy lamps made the sidewalk bright and discovered her bellboy shivering by the open door of a taxicab. As she moved toward it she heard the revolving door behind her buffet the air, then Bel's voice crying out her name.

Abandoning all pretense, Lucinda ran. The bellboy caught her arm to help her into the cab and chattered: "W-where t-t-to, m'm?" She was prevented from answering by Bel, who elbowed the boy aside and caught her by the shoulders.

"No!" he cried violently. "No, you shan't—d'you hear?—you shan't go without listening to me!"

By some means, she did not know quite how, Lucinda broke out of his hands and stepped back.

"Let me alone!" she insisted. "Let me——"

Somebody came between them. Startled, she identified the strange young man of the foyer.

"Can I be of service?" he suggested in an amused drawl.

Instinctively she gasped: "No, please—!" At the same time Bel tried to shoulder the other roughly out of his way; the gratuitous champion stood firm, merely counselling "Easy, old thing, easy!" Then Bel lost his head. Lucinda heard him damning the other. There was a slight scuffle, in which the two, locked in each other's arms, reeled to one side. The bellboy was shouting "Now, ma'm—now's your chance!" She stumbled into the taxi. Holding the door, the boy demanded: "Where to, ma'm—where to?" She gasped: "Anywhere—only, tell him, hurry!" The door crashed, gears meshed with a grinding screech, the cab leaped forward with such spirit that Lucinda was thrown heavily against the back of the seat.

When she recovered, the vehicle was turning a corner. Through its window she caught a glimpse of the sidewalk in front of the Blackstone, just a bare glimpse of two figures struggling, with several others running toward them. Then the corner blocked out the scene.

XVII

DARTING and dodging through traffic-choked thoroughfares, the taxicab had travelled a mile and more before Lucinda felt able to give the next steps the careful consideration which this pinch of mischance imposed.

In the upshot, though street clocks advised that she had the best part of two hours to kill before she could board her train, she tapped on the window and directed her driver to proceed to the Santa Fé Station. She felt reasonably safe in assuming that Bel wouldn't look for her there. Since she had told him she was going to Reno, his natural inference would be that she meant to travel by the direct overland route, he would set himself to waylay her in the Union Pacific terminal if anywhere. Provided, of course, that he had succeeded in discouraging the attentions of the gallant busybody in fit shape to make himself a nuisance again that night.

She couldn't help giggling nervously over the picture painted by a superexcited imagination.

The remaining hours of the evening worked out as eventlessly as she had hoped. Bellamy didn't show up at the station, she dined after a fashion in its restaurant, with her nose in a newspaper none of whose intelligence meant anything to hers, as soon as the platform gates were opened she was conducted by a porter to her reservation in the last car of the train but one, the observation-car; and in the latter Lucinda waited till her berth had been made ready. Then she went to bed.

She had planned to read herself asleep, but the armful of books and magazines purchased at the station bookstall

either purveyed only fiction of a peculiarly insipid sort or else life itself was just then too richly coloured, too swift of movement to admit of that self-surrender which is requisite if mere artistic effort is to take effect.

And then the thoughtful porter had fastened a folded sheet across the double windows to temper the penetrating breath of that bitter night. So it wasn't possible to divert oneself by watching the snow-clad land unroll its blurred vistas of blue nocturnal beauty.

One could do nothing, indeed, but try vainly not to think, watch the curtains swaying that shut out the aisle, listen to the tireless thrumming of the trucks and the melancholy hooting with which the engine saluted every crossroad, and pray for sleep.

Somewhere a peevish child wailed fitfully for hours on end, somewhere else a man snored as if strangling in his sleep. Till long after midnight noisy feet straggled intermittently to and from the observation car. And once Lucinda, at last on the verge of drifting off, started suddenly wide-awake, stabbed to the heart by tardy appreciation of the fact that, now Bel knew where she was bound, she could not be sure of finding even Reno a refuge from his persistence, his importunities.

For the matter of that, if Bel, or the detectives whom he had told Willis he might employ, had been cunning enough to trace her to Chicago, they would find her no matter where else she might seek to hide herself away.

Only perhaps by changing her name . . .

But how could she sue for divorce if she lived under an assumed name?

Toward morning she drifted into an uneasy form of semi-slumber, and from this into deep sleep. It was late when she was awakened by the bustle of people fighting with their garments and breaking the trails to the washrooms, and in the aisle a negro voice intoning musically: "Las' call fo' brekfus in the dinin'-cyar"—over and over.

To find the dining-car Lucinda had to make her way

through so many sleeping-cars that she lost count, cars all alike as to aisles obstructed by people dressing, people passing to and fro, porters dismantling tumbled berths. By way of some slight compensation, she was alloted a small table with places for two, the other chair being untenanted, which she considered much preferable to the tables for four across the aisle. Then, too, the napery was spotless, the silverware lustrous, flowers were brave in a vase at her elbow, the waiter was civil and seemed eager to please.

Lucinda scribbled her order on the blank form provided, then rested her cheek on a hand and gazed moodily out at wheeling perspectives of a countryside blanketed with snow. Reminding herself that the train was due in Kansas City during the morning, she seriously thought of leaving it there and waiting over till accommodations could be had that would insure privacy for the remainder of the journey, even though this might involve weeks of delay.

Grape-fruit, coffee, and toast, all excellent, made her feel a bit better. Nevertheless she made up her mind to ask the conductor to arrange a stop-over for her at Kansas City.

As she was pouring herself a second cup of coffee, the vacant chair at her table was drawn out and an amiable, amused voice asked: "Do you mind my sitting here, Mrs. Druce?"

Lucinda jumped in consternation. The speaker bowed with an ingratiating smile: her unsought champion of the night before! . . .

She recollected herself and gave a jerky inclination of her head; but all she could find to say was "Oh!" Whereupon the young man laughed quietly and, construing her consent, sat down.

"I'm surprised, too," he confessed—"pleasantly, if you don't mind my saying so. And yet the dear public continually kicks about coincidences!"

Lucinda found her tongue but found it incompetent to frame any but formal phrases: "I have a great deal to thank you for——"

"Please don't think of it that way. To the contrary, I owe you all sorts of apologies——"

"Apologies!"

"For butting in where any rational angel would have been scared to death to tread, and particularly for being here—though that was my fault and this isn't. But I'm glad you're not angry with me—" The waiter thrust an order blank with the bill of fare under the young man's nose, and he concluded to give them attention with an easy: "If you'll excuse me . . . "

The head he bowed over the cards was well-modelled and thatched with a good quantity of hair, light brown in colour and amazingly lustrous. A skin whose patina of faint tan resembled that of old ivory, with never a blemish, covered boldly fashioned features. The mobile face had a trick of lighting up when its owner was talking as if aglow with the light of his thought, so that his look was in fact more eloquent than his speech. Lucinda thought she had never seen hands more strong and graceful, or any better cared for, not even Bel's. Nor had Bel ever dressed in better taste.

The object of her interest waved the waiter away and met her openly interested regard without loss of countenance.

"I guess it's time I introduced myself, Mrs. Druce. My name is Summerlad." After a slight pause and with a hint of self-consciousness, he amplified: "Lynn Summerlad."

Sensible that he seemed to expect her to think well of that precious name, Lucinda found no echo for it in the chambers of her memory. She bowed and said "Thank you," and all at once discovered that she had reason to be mystified.

"But how is it you know my name, Mr. Summerlad?"

"That's easy: your husband told me."

Again Lucinda was reduced to a blank "Oh!" This time she felt that she was colouring.

"In the police station," Mr. Summerlad added with a broad grin. "But don't be alarmed, we weren't either of us mussed up much. Only, you see, Mr. Druce rather lost his head—can't say I blame him—and when the innocent bystanders insisted on separating us, and a cop happened along and took a hand, he wouldn't be happy till he'd had me arrested on a charge of assault. So the officer marched us both off to the nearest station-house, with half Chicago tagging at our heels. By the time we got there your husband had cooled down and remembered that publicity wasn't his best bet. So he withdrew the charge."

"How dreadful!" Lucinda murmured, her thoughts with Bellamy. "I'm so sorry."

"No reason to be. If you must know, I enjoyed the adventure tremendously. That's what one gets for having been born with a perverted sense of humour."

"But if you had been locked up——!"

"Oh, it wouldn't have been for long, I'd have got somebody to bail me out inside of fifteen minutes. But there wasn't ever any danger of that, really. You see, the sergeant knew me at sight and—well, the sentiment of all hands seemed to be with me. Besides, it wasn't as if I'd never been pinched before."

"You don't mean to tell me you're in the habit of—of—"

"Of mixing in every time I run across a matrimonial rukus? Hardly! I mean, pinched for speeding. You know what the roads are, out on the Coast, hard and smooth and straight as a string for miles at a time. You can hardly resist them, once you get beyond the city limits. Guess I'll have to after this, though. The last time they got me, the judge gave me his word I wouldn't get off again with a fine, the next offense would mean the hoosegow for mine. And between you and me, I

haven't any hankering to see the inside of the Los Angeles County jail."

"I should hope not."

Lucinda caught the eye of her waiter and gave him a bill to pay for her breakfast. But she couldn't escape with good grace just yet, unless she wished to administer a downright snub she would have to wait for her change.

"I'd like to show you what motoring is around Los Angeles," Mr. Summerlad pursued with breath-taking assurance. "If it isn't an impertinent question, may I ask if that's where you're bound?"

"No," Lucinda replied briefly. One began to foresee that to put a damper on such abounding enterprise would prove far from easy.

"I see: taking in the Grand Canyon, I suppose. You'll find it well worth your while. Gorgeous scenery and everything. I've done the Canyon a dozen times, used to run up there whenever I got a week to myself, you know. If it wasn't for this wretched business I'm in"—again that suspicion of self-consciousness—"I'd drop off there for a few days this trip. But I'm afraid it's no go. Too busy. Beastly nuisance. Still, there's nothing more uncertain than a job like mine. So it's well to make pay while the sun shines."

"I'm sure . . . " said Lucinda, gathering up her change. And Summerlad's face fell touchingly as he grasped the fact that she was really going to leave him to finish his breakfast alone. "I am deeply indebted to you," she pursued. "No, please don't tell me again I must forget it, because I can't and don't want to. I was at my wits' ends last night. But, of course, it isn't a thing one can talk about——"

"Well, there are lots of other things we can talk about," Summerlad rejoined cheerily. "So let's forget the unpleasant ones. That is—hope you don't think I'm impertinent—but it's a long, lonesome trip, and I'll be very

happy if you'll let me prattle in your company now and then."

Since she was leaving the train at Kansas City there was nothing to be gained by being rude. Lucinda contented herself with replying, no, she wouldn't mind, and thrust back her chair. Immediately Summerlad was on his feet, napkin in hand, bowing prettily.

"Awfully good of you, Mrs. Druce. Where shall I find you, say in an hour or two? The observation car?"

"Perhaps," Lucinda smiled.

"Or would you rather I looked you up——?"

"I'm in the last car but one," Lucinda told him sweetly —"Section Ten."

She made her way back to that reservation determined to lose no time about interviewing the conductor. But the porter failed to answer repeated pressures on the call-button, and at length surmising the truth, that he was getting his own breakfast, Lucinda resigned herself to wait. There was plenty of time . . .

Now that she was extricated from it the comic element in her late rencontre began to make irresistible appeal. She picked up a book, opened it, bent her head low above it to hide smiling lips and dancing eyes from people passing in the aisle; but was not well settled in this pose when she heard a joyful cry—"Cindy! Cindy Druce!"—and rose, dropping the book in her astonishment, to be enfolded in the arms of Fanny Lontaine.

XVIII

"I FEEL," Lucinda confessed, "precisely like a weathervane in a whirlwind, I mean the way it ought to: every few minutes I find my nose pointing in a new direction."

"You dear!" Seated opposite her at the windows of the Lontaine drawing-room, Fanny leaned over and squeezed her hand affectionately. "I can't tell you how happy I am that pretty nose is pointing now the same way as ours."

"And I, Fanny. It's really a wonderful sensation, you know, after all that worry and uncertainty, to know one's life is mapped ahead for a few days at least. I don't believe any lost puppy ever felt more friendless than I did just before we met, when I thought I was going to get off at Kansas City. And my present frame of mind is that same puppy's when it finds itself all at once adopted by a family that likes animals."

Kansas City was already the idle menace of a dimming dream. Awkward but unavoidable explanations, haltingly offered, had been accepted without question: a manifestation of tactful sympathy which had not only won Lucinda's heart completely but, working together with her reluctance to proceed to Reno before she could feel reasonably sure of being suffered to live there unmolested, had influenced her to agree to go on with the Lontaines to Los Angeles; whither (she was tacitly led to infer) his motion-picture interests had peremptorily called Lontaine.

It seemed a sensible move as well as one most agreeable in prospect. She could rest in comfort and friendly companionship for a few weeks, consult with Harford

Willis by letter, at leisure and with a calm mind plan for the future. She now saw, as if new light had somehow been cast upon her problems by this meeting of happy chance, that there was really no hurry, no reason why she shouldn't take her time about the unpleasant business, attend to its transaction only when and as it suited her will and convenience. It wasn't as if she wanted to remarry, or was in any way dependent upon Bel and must beg the courts to make him provide for her. If anything, her personal resources exceeded Bellamy's.

And then it would be amusing to see Los Angeles under the wing of so well-informed a motion-picture impresario as Lontaine. That afternon at the Culp studios had been fascinating; how much more so would it be to live for a time in a city that was, at least as Lontaine limned it, one vast open-air studio, to be associated with people who were actually doing something with their lives. What a change from the life that had grown to seem tedious and unprofitable even before Bellamy had made its continuance intolerable!

"But you haven't told me," she complained, "about those tests. Did you go to see them that day? How did they come out? How did I look?"

"Oh, Cindy! what a shame you missed it. You were adorable, everybody simply raved about you."

"Fact, Mrs. Druce. You outclassed even Alma Daley in that Palm Room scene. No, but seriously: it was you first, Miss Daley second, Fanny a good third, the rest nowhere. You missed scoring no end of a personal triumph in the projection-room. Though, if you ask me, Miss Daley was just as well pleased."

"You're making fun of me."

"Absolutely not."

"Well, it's hard to believe, but if you mean it, the Culps and their cameraman would seem to have been right."

"Oh, I'd almost forgotten!" Fanny cried. "Mr. Culp was terribly put out because you weren't there, and made

me promise faithfully to ask you to call him up and make an appointment for another private showing."

"Right about what?" Lontaine earnestly wanted to know.

"Why, they were so sure I would screen well, as they put it, Mr. Culp made me an offer, as we were leaving, to act with his wife in her next picture."

Lontaine's eyes widened into a luminous blue stare; and abruptly, as if to hide the thought behind them, he threw away a half-smoked cigarette and, helping himself to another, bent forward, tapping it on a thumb-nail.

"Really, dearest? How priceless! And what did you say to the creature?"

"Oh, I was kind but firm."

"Ben Culp's a big man in the cinema game," Lontaine commented without looking up. "His advice is worth something, Mrs. Druce. If he says you'd make a hit, you might do worse than listen to him. That is, of course, if you should ever think of taking a flyer in the motion-picture business."

"I'm not even dreaming of such a thing. Why, it's absurd!"

"I'll wager you wouldn't say so if you once saw yourself on the screen. Only wish I had a print of those tests to show you."

"I'm not curious."

"Then you're the modern miracle, Mrs. Druce—a woman without either vanity or a secret ambition to be a cinema star." Lontaine laughed and lazily got up. "I can only say you've got a chance to make a name for yourself I wouldn't overlook if I stood in your shoes. . . . But if you'll excuse me now, think I'll roll along and arrange matters with the conductor and porters."

"You're too good to me," Lucinda protested. "I know I'm imposing——"

"Absolutely nothing in that. Only too happy."

The door was behind Lucinda's shoulder. Closing it,

unseen by her, Lontaine contrived to exchange with his wife a look of profound significance. Then he lounged thoughtfully forward to the club car and delayed there, in deep abstraction, long enough to smoke two cigarettes before proceeding to hunt up and interview the conductor about Lucinda's change of destination, then instruct the porters to shift her luggage to the Lontaine drawing-room and his own effects to the section she was vacating.

Into making this move Lucinda had been talked against her half-hearted demurs. She knew very well it wasn't the right thing to do, to take advantage of their kindness of heart, to separate husband and wife; but they wouldn't listen to her; and after all it was hardly in human nature to undergo again the ordeal of the open sleeping-car by night if one might by any means avoid it; while Lontaine insisted he wouldn't mind in the least.

"I'm an old hand at travelling under any and all conditions," he had asserted—"accustomed to roughing it, you know. Even upper berths hold no terrors for me, while a whole section is simply sybaritic sensuality. If one hadn't brought Fanny along, it would never have entered the old bean to do oneself better than a lower. Absolutely. You don't imagine Fan and I could rest in comfort, knowing you were unhappy back there? Rather not!"

In point of fact, Lontaine had been at once eager to earn Lucinda's favour and not at all averse to a move which promised more personal liberty than one could command penned up in a stuffy coop with one's wife. Oh, not that he wasn't fond enough of Fan, but—well, when all was said, one was bound to admit Fan was a bit, you know, American. Not to put too fine a point on it, decidedly American. Nobody's fool, Fan. Had a head on her shoulders and used it, and a way of looking at one, besides, as if she were actually looking through one, now and then, that made one feel positively ratty. Chap could do with an occasional furlough from that sort of thing.

It wasn't as if they were still lovers, you see. Rough

going, the devil's own luck and mutual disappointment had put rather a permanent crimp into the first fine raptures. They got along well enough nowadays, to be sure, but it was no good pretending that either couldn't have done just as well alone. But then it had hardly been in the first place what one might call a love match. Oh, yes, tremendously taken with each other, and all that; but if you put it to the test of cold facts, the truth was, Fan had married with an eye to that distant title, whose remoteness the War had so inconsiderately failed to abridge, while Lontaine had been quite as much influenced by Fan's filial relationship to a fortune of something like eighty millions. But that hope, too, had long since gone glimmering.

Rotten form, not to say vicious, on the part of the Terror of the Wheat Pit, to cut off his only begotten daughter with a shilling, one meant to say its equivalent measured by the bulk of his wealth. The legacy Fan had picked up in Chicago would have been barely enough to satisfy their joint and several creditors. Not that one was mad enough to fritter the money away like that. But if this Los Angeles venture were to turn out a bloomer . . .

But why anticipate the worst? Buck up and consider the widely advertised silver lining . . . . A bit of luck, falling in with this Druce girl, under the circumstances. No question about the solid establishment of her financial standing: the good old Rock of Gibraltar was a reed in the wind by comparison. . . . Now if only one dared count on Fan's being amenable to reason, grasping the logical possibilities, doing her bit like a sensible little woman . . .

Seated in Section 10, waiting for the porter to bring back his personal impedimenta from the drawing-room, Harry Lontaine turned a handsome face to the window, frowning absently, the nervous frown of a man whose cleverness has never proved quite equal to the task of satisfying appetites at once strong and fastidious.

By degrees its place was taken by a look of dreaming: Lontaine was viewing not the dreary wastes of Kansan lands under the iron rule of Winter but a California of infatuate imagining, a land all smiling in the shine of a benign sun, set with groves of orange trees and olives, dotted with picturesque bungalows whose white walls were relieved by the living green of vines, and peopled by a race of blessed beings born to a heritage of lifelong beauty, youth, and love-in-idleness; a land in whose charmed soil fortunes grew of seeds of careless sowing, and through whose scenes of subtropical loveliness prophetic vision descried a heroic figure moving, courted and applauded by happy, unenvious multitudes, the figure of Harry Lontaine, Esq., newest but mightiest overlord of the cinema . . .

From this delectable realm the dreamer was recalled by consciousness of somebody standing in the aisle and staring impertinently. Racial shyness erased all signs of wistfulness in one instant and cloaked sensitiveness in a guise of glacial arrogance; in another, recognition dawned, and hauteur was in turn discarded and a more approachable mien set up in its stead. Lontaine was too diligent a student of motion-pictures not to know at sight the features of Lynn Summerlad, by long odds the most popular male star of the American cinema. A personage worth knowing . . .

Misreading his expression, Mr. Summerlad felt called upon to apologize.

"Beg your pardon, but I was expecting to find a lady in this section, I may say a friend: a Mrs. Druce. Do you by any chance——?"

XIX

BRIDGE killed the long hours of that first afternoon on board a train whose windows revealed seldom a prospect less desolate than one of prairie meadows fallowed but frozen, dusky beneath a tarnished sky: a still and roomy land spaciously fenced, scored by rare roads that knew no turning, but ran like ruled diameters of the wide ring of the horizon: the wheat-bin of the world swept and garnished by winter winds.

Lynn Summerlad made a fourth at the table set up in the Lontaine drawing-room; invited by Lontaine as an acquaintance of Lucinda's and a grateful addition to the party because he played something better than merely a good game.

Not only "fearfully easy to look at" (as Fanny confided to Lucinda) but fair spoken and well if at times a shade carefully mannered, he was intelligent and ready of wit; so that, when he proved these qualities by not forcing himself upon the trio at or after dinner, he was missed; and Lucinda, while she waited for sleep to blind her eyes that night, discovered that she was looking forward to the next afternoon, when Bridge would be again in order and infeasible without the fourth.

But she was too sleepy to be concerned about the methods with which Summerlad, making no perceptible effort, had succeeded in winning back the ground which over-assurance had lost for him at the breakfast table. It was enough that he qualified as that all too unordinary social phenomenon, "an amusing person."

She began to study him more intently if discreetly, however, when the train pulled into Albuquerque for its

scheduled stop of an hour at noon of the second day, and the Lontaines and Lucinda, alighting to stretch their legs, found Summerlad, alert and debonnaire, waiting on the platform, prepared to act as their guide and protect them against their tenderfoot tendency to purchase all the souvenirs in sight.

This quiet process of noting and weighing ran like a strand of distinctive colour through the patterned impressions of the day, till, retracing it in reverie after nightfall, it was possible for Lucinda to make up her mind that she liked Lynn Summerlad decidedly. True that he was not of her world; but then neither was she herself any more, in this anomalous stage of the apostate wife, neither wife nor widow, not even honest divorcée.

If Summerlad's character as she read it had faults, if an occasional crudity flawed his finish, these things were held to be condonable in view of his youth. He seemed ridiculously young to Lucinda, but sure to improve with age, sure to take on polish from rubbing up against life. Especially if he were so fortunate as to find the right woman to watch over and advise him. An interesting job, for the right woman . . .

Not (she assured herself hastily) that it would be a job to interest her. An absurd turn of thought, anyway. Why she had wasted time on it she really didn't know. Unless, of course, its incentive had lain in consciousness of Summerlad's naïve captivation. One couldn't very well overlook that. He was so artless about it, boyish, and —well—nice. It was most entertaining.

It was also, if truth would out, far from displeasing.

Apprehension of this most human foible in herself caused Lucinda to smile confidentially into the darkness streaming gustily astern from the observation platform, to which the four of them had repaired to wait while their several berths were being made up. But the hour was so late, the night air so chill in the altitudes which the train was then traversing, that no other pas-

sengers had cared to dispute with them the platform chairs; while Fanny had excused herself before and Lontaine had quietly taken himself off during Lucinda's spell of thoughtfulness. So that now she found herself alone with Summerlad, when that one, seeing the sweet line of her cheek round in the light from the windows behind them, and surmising a smile while still her face remained in shadow, enquired with a note of plaintiveness: "What's the joke, Mrs. Druce? Won't you let me in on the laugh, too?"

"I'm not sure it was a joke," Lucinda replied; "it was more contentment. I was thinking I'd been having a rather good time, these last two days."

"It's seemed a wonderful time to me," Summerlad declared in a voice that promised, with any encouragement, to become sentimental.

"Quite a facer for my anticipations," Lucinda interposed firmly—"considering the way I had to fly Chicago and my husband." Then she laughed briefly to prove she wasn't downhearted. "But I daresay you're wondering, Mr. Summerlad . . . "

"Eaten alive by inquisitiveness, if you must know. All the same, I don't want to know anything you don't want to tell me; and I don't have to tell you, you don't have to tell me anything—if you know what I mean."

"It sounds a bit involved," Lucinda confessed, judgmatical; "still, I think I do know what you mean. And it's only civil to tell you I was leaving to go to Reno by way of San Francisco when my husband found me at the Blackstone. But now the Lontaines have persuaded me to spend a few weeks with them in Los Angeles——"

"That's something you'll never regret."

"I hope so."

"You won't if you leave it to me."

"Yes, I'm sure you mean to be nice to us; but you're

going to be very busy when you get to Los Angeles, aren't you?"

"I'm never going to be too busy to——"

"But now you remind me," Lucinda interrupted with decision. "I've got a great favor to beg of you, Mr. Summerlad."

"Can't make it too great——"

"Fanny and I were discussing it this morning, and it seemed wise to us . . . You've seen something of how persistent my husband can be——"

"Can't blame him for that."

"Well, then: the only way I can account for his having found me in Chicago is on the theory that he employed detectives. But of course I'd made it easy for them by using my own name wherever I went."

"Why don't you use another name, then?"

"Just what Fanny and I were saying. If I don't, Bel—Mr. Druce—is sure to follow me to Los Angeles, sooner or later, and make more scenes. I'd like to avoid that, if I can."

"Surest thing you know, he'll find out, if the Los Angeles newspapers ever discover Mrs. Bellamy Druce of New York is in the civic midst. The best little thing they do is print scare-head stories about distinguished visitors and the flattering things they say about our pretty village."

"That settles it, then: I'm going to be somebody else for a while. Help me choose a good, safe nom de guerre, please."

"Let's see: Mrs. Lontaine calls you Cindy . . . "

"Short for Lucinda."

"How about Lee? Lucinda Lee?"

"I like that. But it does sound like the movies, doesn't it?"

"What do you expect of a movie actor, Mrs. Druce?"

"Mrs. Lee, please."

"Beg pardon: Mrs. Lee."

"And you'll keep my horrid secret, won't you?"

"If you knew how complimented I feel, you'd know I would die several highly disagreeable deaths before I'd let you think me unworthy of your confidence."

"That's very sweet," Lucinda considered with mischievous gravity. "And I am most appreciative. But if you will persist in playing on my susceptibilities so ardently, Mr. Summerlad, I'll have to go to bed."

"Please sit still: I'll be good."

"No, but seriously," Lucinda insisted, rising: "it is late, and I want to wake up early, I don't want to miss anything of this wonderful country."

"You won't see anything in the morning but desert, the edge of the Mojave."

"But we've been in the desert all afternoon and I adore it."

"Oh, these Arizona plains! they're not real desert. they're just letting on; give them a few drinks and they'll start a riot—of vegetation. But the Mojave's sure-enough he-desert: sand and sun, cactus and alkali. I'm much more interesting, I'm so human."

"Yes: I've noticed. Masculine human. But, you see, a desert's a novelty. I really must go . . . "

She went to sleep under two blankets, but before daybreak a sudden rise in temperature woke her up.

The train was at a standstill. Lucinda put up the window-shade to see, all dim in lilac twilight, a brick platform, a building of Spanish type, a signboard proclaiming one enigmatic word: NEEDLES.

Sharp jolts in series ran through the linked cars, a trainman beneath the window performed cryptic calisthenics with a lantern, one unseen uttered a prolonged, heart-rending howl, couplings clanked, the train gathered way.

As it toiled with stertorous pantings on up-grades seemingly interminable, the night grew cool again but by no means so cold as at bedtime. The outposts of Winter had been passed. The porter who tidied up the drawing-

room in the morning opened a window and adjusted a cinder-screen: the breath of the desert was warm but deliciously sweet. Outside, heat-devils jigged above a blasted waste that was, as Lucinda viewed it, weirdly beautiful. The noontide air at Barstow had all the fever of a windless day of August in the East. Within the riven scarps of the Cajon Pass it was hotter still. A long, swift down-swoop toward the Pacific brought them by mid-afternoon to San Bernardino, set in emerald, where people lolled about the platform in white flannels and airy organdies.

The panorama of sylvan loveliness, all green and gold, commanded by the windows from San Bernardino onward, prepared for a Los Angeles widely unlike the city of Lucinda's first confused impressions, for something Arcadian and spacious instead of a school of sky-scrapers that might have been transported en masse from almost any thriving commercial centre of the North Atlantic seaboard. She was sensible of dull resentment as Summerlad's car—an open one but of overpowering bigness and staggering in its colour-scheme of yellow and black with silver trimmings—progressed in majesty through streets where monstrous trolleys ground and clanged, motor vehicles plodded, champing at the bits, in solid column formation, and singularly shabby multitudes drifted listlessly between towering white marble walls.

Only train-weariness and the glad prospect of a tub bath earned the Hotel Alexandria forgivenness for its sin of ostentation in pretending to stand at Broadway and Forty-second street, New York.

That sense of having been somehow swindled was, if anything, stronger in consequence of an expedition afoot with Fanny after breakfast, in the course of which the two women explored the shopping and business district adjacent to the hotel. The imaginations responsible for the plan and building of the city had suffered from that deadly blight of imitativeness which afflicts the American men-

tality all the land over, restricting every form of emulation to charted channels, with the result that ambition seldom seeks its outlet in expression of individuality but as a rule in the belittling of another's achievement through simple exaggeration of its bulk and lines, in being not distinctive but only bigger, showier, and more blatant.

Having lunched with Fanny (Lontaine was busy, it was understood, promoting his indefinite but extensive motion-picture interests) Lucinda returned to rooms which Summerlad had caused to be transformed in her absence into the likeness of a fashionable florist and fruiterer's shop; and while she was trying to decide whether to move half the lot or herself out into the hall, the telephone rang and a strange voice announced that Mr. Summerlad's chauffeur was speaking and Mr. Summerlad's car was at the door and likewise at the disposition of Mrs. Lee and Mrs. Lontaine for the afternoon.

"Ought we?" Lucinda doubted with a little grimace.

"Why not?" Fanny asked.

"It seems just a bit . . . Oh, I don't know. I presume it would be ungracious to question Californian hospitality."

"Copy-Californian," Fanny corrected. "Chances are you'll find Summerlad's a native son of Omaha or some point East. Does it matter? He means well, and we want to see Los Angeles."

"But that car!"

"It *is* rather a circus-wagon; but judging by what we've seen in the streets today, the way to make oneself conspicuous here is to sport a car of gaudy black or screaming navy blue. In the racy idiom of the Golden West—let's go."

They went. In ten minutes Los Angeles of the sky-scrapers was forgotten. For three hours league after league of garden-land, groves, plantations, ocean beach, bare brown hills, verdant valleys wide as an Eastern county, all bathed in sunlight of peculiar brilliance and

steadiness falling through crystalline air from a sky innocent of cloud, passed in review before beauty-stricken eyes.

In the end the car turned without warning off a main-travelled highway, swept the bluestone drive of what might well have been parked private grounds, and stopped before the imposing, columned portico of an old Colonial mansion.

The chauffeur turned back a friendly, grinning face. "This is where Mr. Summerlad works," he announced—"the Zinn Studios."

"Studios!"

"Yes, ma'm—where they make the movin'-pictures."

Lucinda stared unbelievingly at the building, finding it hardly possible to reconcile such mellow beauty of scheme and proportion, so harmonious with the spacious lawns and massed foliage of its setting, with memories of those grubby, grimy, back-street premises tenanted by the Culp studios in New York.

A screen-door beneath the portico opened, Mr. Summerlad emerged, a shape of slender elegance in Shantung silk, and ran impetuously down to the car. With more deliberation Lontaine appeared and waited.

"Mrs. Lee, Mrs. Lontaine: I hope you'll forgive me for telling Tom to stop in here instead of taking you back to the hotel. Lontaine's here, and we've planned a little surprise, dinner at my place out in Beverly Hills, just the four of us. You won't say no and spoil everything? That's splendid! But it's early, and perhaps you'd like a look around a regular movie factory first . . . "

Conducting them through the building by way of a panelled entrance hall, Summerlad explained that the stages were temporarily idle, due to the fact that photography on two productions in process had recently been finished and their casts disbanded, only the directors and their staffs remaining to cut and title the films; while the

production in which Summerlad was to play the lead was as yet not ready for the cameras.

The working premises lay behind the administration building. But here again Lucinda noted few points of close resemblance to the Culp studios. A field several acres in extent, about half in turf, was surrounded by a sizeable village of glass-roofed stages and structures housing the technical and mechanical departments—a laboratory, a costumier's, property, carpenter and scene-painting shops, directors' offices, dressing, projection and cutting-rooms, a garage, sheds to shelter motor-cars and trucks by the score, stables, a small menagerie, a huge tank for "water stuff," a monolithic fireproof vault of cement for the storage of film.

Due in great measure to temporary suspension of active camera-work, the place seemed very peaceful and pervaded by an atmosphere of orderliness and efficiency. There were no actors wasting time about the grounds, no sets occupied the huge enclosed stages, the men at work in the several departments seemed all to be busy.

"Well, Mrs. Lee: what do you think of a California studio? Not much like what you've seen back East, eh?"

Lucinda shook her head, and smiled. "I am enchanted with this country," she said; "if what I've seen of it this afternoon is any criterion, I'm afraid it's going to be hard to go away from . . . "

"You haven't begun to see it yet." Summerlad declared. "Wait till we've had a few motor trips."

"As for your studio, it is most marvellous to me. If they're all like this, I don't wonder people are mad to act in motion-pictures. If Mr. Culp had promised me anything like this, I don't believe I should have had the courage to refuse."

"It's not too late to change your mind, Mrs. Lee," Lontaine suggested. "In fact, if I thought there was any hope you would, I'd go down on my knees to you. Oh, not to act for Culp, but for me; or rather, for yourself, as the

head and the star of your own company. No: I'm serious. I've been talking with several people today who want me to try producing out here. I can get unlimited capital to back me. This country today is crying for better pictures—and I know how to make them. I can bring to the American cinema the one thing it needs, a thorough knowledge of European methods. Only one thing makes me hesitate, the lack of a suitable star. All the people of real ability seem to be tied up under long-term contracts. I may lose months looking for the right actress unless you——"

"Why pick on me?" Lucinda laughed. "I'm not even an actress."

"Ah! you forgot I've seen you prove on the screen what you can do. You don't know yourself, Mrs. Lee. There isn't a woman in the country can touch you, if you'll take your ability seriously. You need only two things to make you great, a good director, and self-confidence."

"Aren't you running a great risk, making such flattering overtures to an untried, unknown amateur?"

"Don't worry about me. If I had any hope of being able to persuade you to try it on, I'd tell you to name your own terms, and shoulder the risk without a murmur."

Lontaine's earnestness was so real that one might no longer meet his arguments with levity. There was a strained look of anxiety in the blue eyes, a restrained passion of pleading in the ordinarily languid accents. Or else Lucinda fancied these things.

But a sidelong glance showed that Fanny, too, was apparently hanging between hope and fear . . .

And a thought revived that had once or twice before presented itself, a suspicion that all was not as well as one might wish with the state of the Lontaine fortunes, strengthening the surmise that Lucinda's decision meant more to them both than Lontaine had confessed.

Still one hesitated to believe . . .

"But you can't be serious! Do you really want me to become a movie actress under your management?"

"You can't think of anything I wouldn't do to persuade you."

"Why not, Mrs. Lee?" Summerlad urged. "It would be great fun for you, and you can't fail, you can't lose anything. If you only knew how inferior most stars are to you in every way . . . "

"And if you should fail, Cindy," Fanny chimed in—"what does it matter? Who would know? It wouldn't be you, it would be Lucinda Lee."

"No," Lontaine insisted: "I've got a better screen name that that for her. Not Lucinda: Linda Lee."

"Come, Mrs. Lee: say you'll try it on, if only for the lark of it."

"If I should, Mr. Summerlad, it wouldn't be for fun."

"So much the better."

"Then you will?" Lontaine persisted. "Do say yes."

"Let me think . . . "

And why not? Lucinda asked herself. She was alone in the world, lonely but for these good friends who needed her help, or seemed to. It would be good fun, it would be interesting, it would satisfy a need of which she had been discontentedly aware even in the days when she had yet to dream of leaving Bel. And—even as Fanny had argued—if she should fail and have to give it up, who would care what had become of "Linda Lee"?

"Very well," she said at length, with an uncertain smile —"suppose we try."

XX

"TO tomorrow's morning star of the screen, Linda Lee!"

Thus Lynn Summerlad, mildly exalted, graceful and gracious even beyond his studied habit, flourishing a glass of California champagne above the dinner table in his bungalow in Beverly Hills.

The toast went by acclamation, and Lucinda laughed, at once gratified, diverted, and disposed to deprecate the spirit of these felicitations as premature.

It all seemed rather ridiculous, when one stopped to think, this taking for granted the success of a venture projected so lately, by no strain of imagination to be considered as already launched, and based wholly upon the postulation that the greenest of novices might by some sorcery of the cinema be ripened overnight into a genius of sorts.

A phrase of Culp's recurred unbidden: "A lot of kids, that's what we got to make pitchers with, a lot of kids."

It *was* childish, in a way; on the other hand, it was undeniably pleasant to think of oneself as one was being tempted to, as a sort of Sleeping Beauty of the screen only waiting to be awakened to vivid life by one wave of the witching wand of courage and self-confidence; pleasant to let oneself go and believe such things might be.

Nor was this difficult. Whether it resulted from the catching enthusiasm of her company, or from self-reliance new-born of her success in doing without Bellamy, or whether it were the glamour of this romantic land, where man since time out of memory had been accustomed to see his maddest dreams come true, certain it was that

there seemed nothing essentially improbable in the assumption that "Linda Lee," could figure if she would as "tomorrow's morning star of the screen."

One had only to listen to the gossip of Lontaine and Summerlad to appreciate that stranger things had happened in the history of motion-pictures. Nothing, indeed, was conceivably more strange than that same history, more fantastic and incredible than the record of its growth, almost within the span of a single decade, from the status of a toy to that of an institution forming an inseparable part of the fabric of life, taking its toll of the humblest, and throning and dethroning kings of finance with the impersonal ruthlessness of an elemental force.

One of the greatest of the producing organizations, whose studios covered whole blocks of the heart of Hollywood, had had its beginnings in a trifling story photographed under a big sun-umbrella in a vacant lot. Its most formidable rival, with which it had ultimately amalgamated, had been first financed with the mean savings of a fur-cutter from the lower East Side of New York. Men whose abilities had proved inadequate to command steady employment at fifty dollars a week in the legitimate theatre were drawing a daily wage of five hundred dollars as directors of motion-pictures. The one-time pantomime comedian of an English company presenting a knockabout vaudeville act had made himself a multi-millionaire through clowning before a camera. Young men whose dramatic equipment was limited to the knowledge of how to show their teeth and slick their hair, young women who had walked into favour on the strength of their noble underpinning alone, were selling their services to the cinema under contracts running for terms of years at five thousand dollars a week; and you could take it from Mr. Summerlad that most of these had come to Los Angeles with not more than one dollar to click against another.

"Why, look at me," he invited in an expansive moment;

"never had earned a dollar in my life. Didn't have to. you know: folks had a little money. Six years ago my little sister caught a bad cold and the doctor prescribed a Winter in California. Mother and I brought her out and rented a bungalow in the foothills, up back of the Hollywood Hotel. One day while I was wandering about I saw a car-load of people in paint and evening clothes stop in front of a house with good-looking grounds. I stopped, too. So did others; quite a crowd collected while they were setting up the camera. Presently a little fellow in riding-breeches, with an eyeshade, a shock of red hair, and more freckles than anybody ever saw on a human map before or since, came weaving through the crowd as if he was looking for somebody. When he saw me, he stopped and said: 'You'll do. Got a dress suit?' I laughed and said I had. He took out a little book, wrote down my name and address and said: 'Studio tomorrow morning at eight, made up. We'll need you about three days. Five a day.' Then he hustled on. I went home and told my mother and sister the joke. They egged me on to try it for the fun of it. Within two months I was on the payroll at a hundred a week, and now . . . "

Summerlad flashed an apologetic smile. "One of the worst faults we movie actors have, Mrs. Lee, is talking big about our salaries. So I wont say any more than this: outside the Big Four—Mary and Doug and Charlie and Bill Hart—there's mighty few that drag down as much green money a week as I do."

"I'm glad to absolve you of the sin of boasting, Mr. Summerlad."

"I suppose that did sound funny; but then, you see, I *am* a movie actor, I don't pretend to be better than the rest of us. . . . You wouldn't guess who that director was—assistant director he was then—who gave me my first engagement: Barry Nolan!"

The name was apparently known to Lontaine, for he

exclaimed "You don't mean it!" as if no more exciting information had come to his ears in many days.

"The man I've got in mind to direct you in your first picture, Mrs. Lee; that is, if you can get hold of Barry. You couldn't do better, but his salary's ee-normous. He's working down in Culver City now, and I don't know how long his contract runs, but you might be lucky enough to make a deal of some sort. I'd give him a ring and find out for you, but I happen to know Barry's got a party on at Sunset tonight. We might jump into my machine and blow down there, if you like."

"There's no hurry, Mr. Summerlad. Remember, Mr. Lontaine hasn't taken the first step toward forming a company yet; he isn't in a position to make Mr. Nolan any definite offer."

"Well, but I'd hate to have you lose a chance. Barry's a wonder. Even Griffith takes a back seat when Barry Nolan picks up the megaphone. And there isn't anything I wouldn't do for him. Lord! how he worked to break me in."

Summerlad sighed, reminiscent. "Them was the happy days. We worked hard for little money, but we had a good time and a healthy one, out in the open air practically all day long. Light effects were then just beginning to be discussed; I don't believe two studios on the Coast had enclosed stages. Generally speaking, all our work was done either on location or on open stages under diffusers."

Lucinda repeated the last word with an enquiring inflexion, and Summerlad explained.

"You see, in those days we had to depend on the sun to light our interior sets, and direct exposure meant hard contrasts of light and shadow that didn't look natural. So we stretched great sheets of thin cloth on wire frames overhead, and they broke up the sun's rays and diffused an even glow all over the sets. But of course that restricted us to overhead lighting for all interiors,

and that was monotonous and unnatural besides, because ordinary rooms aren't lighted from the ceiling. And my! but it used to be cosy, working under diffusers on a summer's day!"

"But if you depended on the sun so exclusively," Fanny wanted to know, "what did you do in the rainy season?"

"Loafed, that's all: just loafed. There wasn't anything else to do but loaf around and watch the sky for signs of a break and tell each other how good we were. That was another reason why artificial lighting had to come; it cost too much to carry studio overheads with all production at a standstill during a rainy season that would maybe last five months, or a heavy production payroll when often the rain would stop camera-work for five days on end, and you never could count on two clear days together. So, one after another, the big studios began to build enclosed stages and work more and more by Kliegs and Cooper-Hewitts, till at last—well, today the open stage is almost a thing of the past, and acting for the camera isn't the good fun it used to be—kenneled all day long on a sweltering stage, and the lights getting your eyes like they do. Sometimes, after a spell of work on interiors, I'm as good as blind for a week. . . . Funny to think—isn't it?—the California studios are using artificial light almost exclusively, except of course for location work, when what brought them out here was steady sunlight that didn't cost anything seven or nine months out of each year."

"But if there is no longer any real reason, such as the economy of sunlight, why do the producers stop on here?"

"Because they took root in Los Angeles in the early days, before people had forgotten that principles of ordinary economy might be applied to making pictures, and what took root grew, till today there are hundreds of millions invested in picture plants here. Also because all the picture people have dug in around the plants. Nearly every good actor has his permanent home here, likewise

most of the bad ones; and those who do get a job in the East hurry back as soon as they finish up, so as not to be among the missing if they're wanted for another job. You can cast almost any picture perfectly in a few days in Hollywood, whereas any place else, except maybe New York, it would take weeks to locate your people and bring them together, and there'd be transportation to pay for into the bargain."

Lontaine interposed a question of a technical nature, and as Summerlad answered him at length, Lucinda's attention wandered, she began to think more about the speaker, less about what he was saying. Undeniably a most satisfying creature, at least to look at. Bending over the table, his face glowing as he illustrated his meaning with an animated play of hands: though his words were all for Lontaine. Summerlad's consciousness was constant to Lucinda, his quick eyes were forever seeking hers . . . Hard hit and making no secret of it.

Not that it mattered, more than for the good it did one's self-esteem to be respectfully if openly adored by a personable young man whom one found agreeable. Vanity had been sorely sprung by Bellamy's sacrifice of his wife's love to his appetite for the cheap excitement of flirting with women of cheap emotions. His pursuit of her Lucinda valued at no more than one last effort to salve the hurt her desertion of him had dealt to his vanity. Neither had Daubeney's devotion meant a great deal: being something too familiar through old acquaintance not to be misprized. It had needed some such new conquest as this to make Lucinda think well of herself again; this at least proved her charms not yet passée. Reassurance for which she was disproportionately grateful; and gratitude is commonly the most demoralizing of vices.

Lucinda inclined to approve the style in which Summerlad maintained himself. The bungalow, secluded in wide and well-kempt grounds, might have served as the

warm-weather retreat of a Grand Duke. And if there was a suspicion of rule-of-thumb in some of its effects, at least it could be said that Summerlad had shown sound judgment in selecting an interior decorator of sound taste.

The dinner had been well cooked and served by a deft Japanese. As it neared its close a more cheerful partie carrée would have been far to seek. Indeed, had Lucinda entertained genuine misgivings as to the wisdom of her decision to try her luck on the screen, they must have been compensated by its action on the spirits of her friends. And it couldn't have been anything else, for they had partaken sparingly of the native champagne which, while fair enough of its kind, was nothing to seduce palates educated on London Dry. Yet Fanny's effervescence outvied that of the wine. Lontaine's eyes had lost altogether their tense expression, Summerlad was on his mettle in his dual rôle of host and courtier, Lucinda herself was stirred by a gayety she had too seldom known since the first years of her marriage.

By merely turning her head she could look out through an open casement to a lawn where moonlight like liquid silver slept between mysterious, dense masses of purple shadow. The breath of the night was bland and fragrant. Somewhere at a distance a sentimental orchestra was playing, possibly at the Beverly Hills Hotel. In Chicago the thermometer had shivered in the neighbourhood of zero; New York, according to telegraphic news, was digging out from under a snowfall second only to that of its legendary blizzard.

"I want to purr," Lucinda confessed, finding Summerlad's eyes upon her.

"You're beginning to fall under the spell of California."

"I told you this afternoon I was already sensitive of its enchantment. Tonight, I think, completes its work: I am enslaved."

"I must make the most of these moments, then. Pres-

ently we'll both be busy, you in especial far too busy to give me many evenings like this."

"I'm not at all afraid of being doomed to ennui through any lack of ingenuity in you."

"If I'm not mistaken, that's a dare."

"It's as you care to take it."

He accepted with a smile the smiling gage of her eyes. They understood each other perfectly.

When it was time to return to the Alexandria, Summerlad insisted on driving them home himself; and as they drew near to Hollywood swung the car sharply off the highroad, and took a by-way leading into the foothills. In a few minutes more they had left behind every hint of civilization, other than the well-metalled way they travelled, and were climbing a road that wound snakily up precipitious mountainsides, threaded unholy gulches, or struck boldly across spine-like ridges from which the ground, clothed in chaparral, fell dizzily away on either hand into black gulfs of silence. The air grew colder, Lucinda and the Lontaines grateful for the wraps which Summerlad had pressed upon them. In the course of half an hour the car halted on an isolate peak, and all the lowlands lay unfolded to their vision, from the foothills to the sea, a land like a violet pool with a myriad winking facets of blue-white light; as some vast store of diamonds might be strewn by hands of heedless prodigality upon a dark velvet field.

Pointing, Summerlad began to recite the names of places represented by lines and groups of lights: Hollywood at their feet, the Wilshire district with Los Angeles beyond, Culver City, Pasadena away to the left, Santa Monica far to the right, Venice, Del Rey, Redondo . . . "The kingdoms of the world you're come to conquer, Mrs. Lee."

"I shan't say 'Get thee behind me,'" Lucinda retorted; "I've a sensible notion you're safer where I can keep an eye on you."

It was true enough that the facile infatuation which California inspires in the uninitiate already held her senses in fee; she felt as one might who had miraculously found the way to cross the far horizon and go down into the magic realms of true romance.

But she fell asleep that night to dream of coursing a will-o'-the-wisp through a land whose painted illusion failed and faded as she fled, till in the end there was no more beauty, nor happiness nor hope, but only the bare grin of the desert savage and implacable.

She started awake with her husband's name trembling on her lips.

XXI

THE room the Lontaines occupied in the Alexandria adjoined Lucinda's, and while she was lazing over breakfast and trying to find her way about in newspapers whose screaming local patriotism made one feel vaguely ashamed of having been born elsewhere, Fanny tapped on the communicating door and drifted in, en négligé, with a cigarette and an airy nonchalance oddly at war with a problematic shadow that lurked in her eyes.

"My amiable first husband," she announced, "has charged me to arrange for an audience at your convenience."

"As soon as you like," Lucinda laughed—"I mean, give me time to crawl into some clothes."

"Sure you don't mind?—and the day so immature!"

"Not a bit. In fact, I've been thinking, if we're really going through with this lunatic adventure, the less time we lose the better."

"If!" Fanny caught the word up quickly. "Does that mean you want to reconsider?"

"No, dear; merely that I've been wondering, ever since I woke up, whether the night might not have brought your husband perhaps wiser counsel."

"So much depends upon what you mean by 'wiser.' But if it's a change of heart, I'm in a position to assure you nothing like that has happened to Harry."

"I only meant—between ourselves—I can't think it quite wise of him to risk much on my chances of making good as a movie star."

Fanny achieved a ladylike snort of derision. "Never worry about what Harry risks! Besides, I won't for an

instant admit there's any chance of failure, so far as you're concerned, Cindy. But I will admit I'm counting on your common-sense to hold Harry down to earth."

"How do you mean, dear?"

"Oh, it isn't that I question his grasp of business conditions and fundamentals. But he's got such an active mind, he finds it hard to let well enough alone, he's everlastingly embroidering everything he takes an interest in with the most amazing arabesques. Let him run wild, and by nightfall he'll have the motion-picture industry of the United States pooled under one Napoleonic directing head, whose identity I leave you to surmise—and all on the basis of his undertaking to shape the film destinies of Linda Lee. And he'll draw diagrams and produce figures to prove what he predicts can't fail to come true, he'll even name the date of the coming millenium in the Lontaine fortunes. So somebody's got to keep a check on the accelerator, and I'm incompetent, I don't know the first thing about business, and I'm looking to you."

"Afraid you're leaning on a broken reed, my dear."

"Don't believe it. You're so wonderfully level-headed about things, Cindy, I have implicit confidence in you. Now this morning Harry has waked up with his poor dear bean more than usually addled with gorgeous schemes, and says he wants to consult you. What he really wants is your unconditional approval of everything he has to propose. It's only fair to warn you, any other attitude will prove inacceptable in the extreme. That's what Harry calls 'talking business.' So do be wise as well as kind."

"I'll try," Lucinda promised.

Considered in the light of this semi-serious warning, all that Lontaine had to lay before her seemed almost disappointingly conservative. But perhaps he was more subtile than Fanny knew. Uncommonly grave and intent when he presented himself for the conference, in business-like fashion he went at once to the heart of things.

"I've been thinking it over all night," he assured Lucinda seriously, as she and Fanny settled to give him attention, "and it seems to me I ought to let you know more specifically what you're letting yourself in for, before I ask you to hold yourself pledged."

"That sounds suspiciously like preparation for letting me down easily."

"Please don't think that." There was a convincing glint of alarm in Lontaine's look. "Never more enthusiastic, more sure of anything than I am of your eventual success. But it's going to mean hard work for both of us, slavery for many months, and hindrances may crop up we ought to be prepared against."

"I shan't mind hard work," Lucinda replied. "In fact, I can't think of anything that I'd find more agreeable than consciousness of at least trying to do something worth while with my life. As for disappointments, I don't expect much, so I can't be very hard hit if everything doesn't turn out as happily as one might wish."

"If that spirit won't win for us, nothing will," Lontaine declared. "Now for a tentative programme . . . Our first step, naturally, will be to incorporate. And since it seems to be the fashion on this side, and our corporate name will serve as a trade-mark, I venture to suggest *'Linda Lee Inc.'*"

"One name is as good as another, don't you think?"

"Good. Call that settled. Then as to finances. Going on my own judgment and observation, I'm all for a small capitalization, just enough to give us working capital with a fair margin to insure against loss of time."

"I don't think I understand."

"Well, it's like this: My study of American studio conditions has satisfied me that production costs this side are normally excessive. Of course, allowance must be made for exaggeration; it seems to be a custom of the trade for the producer to multiply several times his actual outlay on a picture and broadside the result as if dollars made

pictures and not brains. But I happen to know the average cost of a well-made picture today is between eighty and a hundred and twenty thousand—too much by half."

"Mr. Culp's secretary told me Alma Daley's pictures cost between a hundred and fifty and two hundred thousand each."

"If so, Ben Culp is throwing money away through ignorance or bad management or indifference. The returns are so tremendous from a really good picture, or almost any picture with a popular star, nowadays, the cinema financier can count on getting his money back and as much more in the first year of a picture's life and still have a going property, one that will bring in clear profits for a couple of years to come. So he isn't much inclined to worry about costs. Then again, in the big organizations, production costs are inflated by heavy overhead charges."

"I haven't the faintest idea what that means."

"Overhead means a proportionate charge against each production of the cost of maintaining the entire organization, including all expenses, many of which have nothing to do with the actual making of pictures. In a small organization, such as ours will be, overhead will be cut to the bone. We can make as good pictures as anybody at an average cost of not more than fifty thousand dollars; with care and ingenuity, once we get going, we'll be able to pare that down considerably. But say a picture does cost fifty thousand, its gross earnings, the first year. should be two-hundred and fifty thousand. Of that the producer gets sixty-five per cent., in round figures a hundred and sixty-five thousand. We ought to turn out not less than four pictures a year, which will mean at least four-hundred and fifty thousand clear profit to be split up between the star, the executive, and the capitalists."

"It sounds like a fairy tale."

"It *is* a fairy tale—come true in real life. Nothing else could account for the present-day tribe of motion-picture

millionaires. Some of them have a certain shrewdness, almost all have business cunning of a low order, I daresay a dogged Diogenes could run to earth one or two who are honest, but precious few of them are men of either education, taste, artistic instinct or appreciation."

"But how could such men——?"

"They had imagination enough to see cheap amusement for the masses in what most intelligent people, a dozen years ago, considered merely a mechanical curiosity. So they invested their small savings, these fur-cutters and petty tradesmen and barnstorming actors, in the venture that high finance scorned; and the boom, when it came, found them securely in the saddle. That's why the public gets so much perfunctory and stupid stuff thrown at it today."

"But our pictures aren't going to be in that class—are they?"

"Rather not! We're going to go at this thing in an intelligent way. We'll pick a good staff, select our stories with care, get the best men to write our scenarios, and gather round us a group of actors, like those who have made the Continental cinema what it is today, more interested in their work than in themselves, willing to take their chances of scoring in fine ensemble acting instead of insistent that every story shall be distorted, every scene directed, every picture cut to throw a so-called star into prominence. Even in America such sincere actors exist, and we'll find and bring them together and prove that cinema production can be an art as well as a money-grubbing scheme."

"Bravo! bravo!" Fanny interpolated. "Hark to the dear man! Now if only he'll perform one-half as bravely as he promises——!"

Lontaine flushed a little but paid no other heed. "To get back to the question of capitalization. . . . Arbitrarily setting fifty thousand as a fair production cost, we'll want at least a hundred and fifty thousand to begin with."

"But surely we won't need a hundred thousand margin for safety?"

"Not for safety—for economy. When we finish our first picture it will be a matter of six months at least before it can be exhibited, before, that is, it will begin to repay its cost. Meantime, we can't afford either to disband our company or hold it together in idleness. We ought to start our second picture the day after we finish the first. Thus we will waste no gestures. And allowing three months to each, we should have our second and third ready by the time the first is released. Do you follow me, Mrs. Druce?"

"I think you're quite right. You said yesterday you had some people ready to furnish the necessary capital?"

"In half an hour I can find half a dozen who'd jump at the chance," Lontaine replied without a quiver. "They don't know you, of course, Mrs. Druce, I mean they don't know Linda Lee and what she's capable of, and naturally they would be inclined to boggle at such a proposition coming from anybody but me. But they do know me, they have faith in my ideals and my practical knowledge of the business, and nothing would please them better than to see their money at work in my hands. The question is: Do we want to take them in? Is it necessary? Is it good business?"

Lucinda shook her head. "I'm sure I don't know," she said, smiling. "Please be patient with my stupidity in money matters."

"I mean to say: With profits of approximately half a million a year in sight, do we want to see the third share that would ordinarily go to capital diverted to the pockets of people who have no interest in our business except as a source of revenue?"

"Can we avoid that?"

"Simply enough, if you care to take the risk. I'll be frank with you and confess I'm not financially in a position to invest in the business myself. But if you should

decide to back yourself, use your own money to finance Linda Lee Inc. you would ultimately receive two-thirds of the profits instead of the one you'd be entitled to as the star. And no outsider would have anything to say about the way we conduct our own business."

"I don't think I care about that," Lucinda observed thoughtfully. "But it does appeal to me, the idea that if I use my own money nobody but myself can suffer if we're making a mistake."

"Then—you will find the capital yourself, Mrs. Druce?"

"I think I can manage it without too much trouble."

Lontaine sighed quietly and relaxed. The contented glow of last night crept back into his eyes. He produced his cigarette-case, and began to smoke in luxurious puffs.

"Need there be any trouble?"

"I'm only wondering what Harford Willis will say." Lucinda laughed quietly. She could imagine the horror that would overspread the carven countenance of the gentleman of the old school when he learned that she meant to add the unpardonable solecism of play-acting to the heinous but after all fashionable estate of divorcée. "An old friend of my father's who looks after my estate," she explained to Lontaine's echo of the name. "He thinks I've disgraced myself as it is. When I tell him what more I mean to do, I'm sure he'll think I'm damned beyond redemption—socially, at all events."

"Need he know?"

"I'm afraid so. I don't believe I've got a hundred and fifty thousand dollars on deposit altogether. You see, most of my income is reinvested promptly as it comes in, leaving only enough to meet my usual, everyday expenses."

"Surely you can fob him off with some excuse, Mrs. Druce." Lontaine was frowning at the carpet. "Of course, you understand, I'm only thinking of your peace of mind."

"I'll think it over. But whether he likes it or not, we'll go ahead as we've planned. And as for money to get started with, I'm sure I can put something over fifty thousand at your command."

"Famous!" Lontaine's brow cleared instantly. "I may call on you for a cheque in a day or two, for preliminary expenses, a retainer for our lawyers, incorporation fees, and the like, you know."

"That brings up a question that bothers me," Lucinda confessed. "You see, my cheques will be signed Lucinda Druce, and I don't like to risk my incognita as Linda Lee. I don't want Bellamy to find out where I am —and I don't want anybody else to know but the three of us—and Mr. Summerlad, I'd almost forgotten he knew —unless I really do succeed."

"Nothing to fret about," Lontaine declared. "Simply make your cheques payable to me. I'll open an account with a local bank in my name first, and transfer it to the account of Linda Lee Inc. as soon as we incorporate."

XXII

LUCINDA at about this time began to know imitations of a psychic phenomenon working within herself for which she could find no better name than that of multiple personality. She was well aware that she didn't mean by this precisely what the term would have connoted to the mind of a psychoanalyst, but it was as near as she was able to come to a description of the disconcerting performances of the several Lucindas who seemed to tenant her by turns and be forever warring for the right to rule her daily actions and form her final destiny.

Figuring her soul in the likeness of a ship at sea, her sensations much resembled those which might conceivably inform a passenger watching half a dozen captains who were continually elbowing one another aside and taking command and steering each a quite new course of individual preference; with the inevitable result that a chart of any one day's run must have closely counterfeited the trackings of a fly that had crawled out of an ink-pot upon a fair white sheet of paper.

Most puzzling circumstance of all, the one true captain seemed to be standing apart throughout and observing the antics of these upstart understudies with considerable interest, not a little wonder, and some alarm.

Certain it was that she had ceased to be the single-minded and straightforward young woman she had been accustomed to think herself, a creature moulded in an uncompromising cliché of caste and moving through life upon lines definitely laid down, thinking only the thoughts, uttering only the formulæ, describing only the motions, ex-

periencing only the sentiments and sensations considered suitable to one of her condition.

One act of mutiny had made an end to that one's reign and left an empty throne to be contested by this odd crew of usurpers, who were so many and so various, and in general so vaguely defined, that they defied cataloguing; though a few there were who by virtue of pronounced idiosyncrasy came to be recognized familiars.

There was one clear of vision, unillusioned even unto cynicism, but honourable, straight-spoken and fair-dealing, at once proud and unpretending, who was mostly in evidence in her hours of social life with the Lontaines, as distinguished from the time she spent with them in the way of business. This was Mrs. Bellamy Druce of her equivocal phase, who had ceased to be a wife and had yet to become unwedded: a woman worldly-wise and a trifle weary, but warm of heart, tolerant, and companionable.

Then there was Linda Lee, the rather excited and ambitious young thing who was all the while flying hither and yon in motor-cars, making curious acquaintances by the score, simulating an intelligent interest in affairs, legal matters, comparative merits of different studio accommodations, cost of equipment, salaries of employees, all those questions upon which Lontaine did her the honour of consulting her, knowing full well that she was fully satisfied as to his competence and incredulous of her own, and would faithfully endorse any course he might take or recommend. The first function of Miss Lee's office in the scheme was apparently that of drawing cheques. She led a busy life. . . . It was also anything but an uninteresting one, though Miss Lee often wondered what it was all about and how she had come to be in it and sometimes felt that she was no better than a poor impostor and doomed in due course to be disgracefully shown up.

Another was a rare, shy visitant, never viewed by mortal eyes, who held dominion only in the dead hours of

these nights when Lucinda lay wakeful and lonely, feeling lost without that which for so long had seemed an essential part of life, Bel's love and the dearness of him. A pathetic spirit, prone to tears and sighs and bitter self-reproachings. But when morning came, this one had always retreated to the outermost marches of memory, where she lingered, looking back a little wistfully, a timid wraith with pleading eyes, tenuous and evanescent as the souvenir of some caress long perished.

Again one was aware of a Lucinda who, abhorring the vacuum of empty hours, committed the maddest extravagance and fairly ran amok in shops, buying right and left with a recklessness that soon made her unawares the axis of a gale of whispers; in this manner dissipating a minor fortune before her first month in Los Angeles had run out.

Lamentably there was a Lucinda who did not scruple to resort to the shabbiest shifts to compass her ends; who, for example, without one qualm of conscience wrote to Harford Willis that, having been influenced to delay proceeding to Reno, she had fallen under the spell of Southern California, thought seriously of making it her future home, and would be glad if he would turn her certain investments into ready cash against the contingency of her deciding to purchase some princely property.

Last of all the major company of these lately apprehended Lucindas was the woman emotionally malcontent, newly fallen out of love but none the less still in love with love, who with eyes now amused, now indulgent, now shocked or startled, saw herself slowly and reluctantly but surely weakening to the wooing of Lynn Summerlad.

In a way the thing seemed fated. She knew nobody else, aside from the Lontaines. She was meeting people daily, of course, but not on terms to warrant any but the most commonplace civilities: men of affairs who reasonably reckoned her a pretty nonentity and concentrated on

Lontaine as the person with money to spend; now and again some minor celebrity of the cinema colony, who, if male, would find some means to let her know she wouldn't be too ill treated should she succumb, or if female, would both envy and resent her inimitable chic, and at the same time put her in a place as a mere amateur who musn't expect too much.

When she came to look back at those days, Lucinda saw herself as one always on the go with the Lontaines and Summerlad in his spectacular motor-car: pelting headlong for some objective leagues away, Riverside for luncheon at the Mission Inn, San Diego for a week-end, Santa Barbara for the drive along the magnificent Coastal Highway, or any other of two-score remote play-grounds; going out of an evening to one of the local restaurants, Victor Hugo's for its good food and urbane service, Marcelle's for dancing and its dumbfoundering scheme of decorations, Sunset Inn for the lark of it and the people one saw, the Ship for its wild traditions, or to some lost place in the labyrinth of strange streets below South Main, to which Summerlad alone knew the way, where one might get food purely exotic in character, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese; or (and this was part of the programme of nearly every night) braving the bill-of-fare at one or another of the city theatres or their arrogant rivals, the sumptuous cinemas.

In the course of that first month Lucinda sat through more photoplays than she had ever seen before, interested even when, as all too often, they were overweeningly ambitious of intention and sorry in execution; determined to read their riddle and learn what Summerlad and Lontaine were talking about when they argued in the jargon of the studios. . . . But it was really the audiences that thronged these thundering temples of the silent drama that fascinated her, audiences of a texture inexplicably strange to Eastern eyes, like the street crowds from which they were drawn, so dense and constant that

one was tempted to believe the people of Los Angeles never went home except to sleep.

Such torrents of motor vehicles brawled through the city channels, the only wonder was that anybody ever walked. Yet it was seldom Lucinda's fortune to view the sidewalks in the heart of town when they were not a-swarm with moving masses of the most heterogeneous composition, shuffling, staring, oddly taciturn.

The great body of these seemed to be sober-sided souls in steady circumstances; a bourgeoisie smug and semi-shabby, ignorant of its past, heedless of its future, largely unconcerned with its present; self-dedicated to existences as uninteresting and useful as a cow's. Summerlad cursed it with a local aphorism to the sense that Los Angeles was governed by small-town people from the Middle West who had come to California each with one lung and one dollar and a grim determination to hang onto both to the bitter end.

Infiltrating this primary element was one alien to it but comprehending also figures that might have served for a pageant of North American history, figures many of them like old wood-cuts brought to life; red Indians, Down East Yankees, Mexicans, gaunt hillsmen from Kentucky and Tennessee, towering Texans, ranchmen from the plains, and folk in whose eyes shone the brooding abstraction of the desert; in the main ill-clothed and uncouth of gesture, hiding behind apathetic masks a certain awe and sense of awkwardness.

And then, like spume wind-torn from the crests of sullen seas, glittering with rainbow iridescence, a froth of creatures money-drunk and amusement-mad, drones lured to California by its fabled Winter climate, and an earth-born army audaciously experimenting with wings bestowed by the careless bounty of the cinema.

Against this picture of a ceaseless crush in the centre of the city, Lucinda set in contrast so sharp that it never lost its power to stir her wonder, a picture on every hand re-

peated off the main arteries of traffic in the radiating residential suburbs: an interminable street of broad-eaved white bungalows hugging the ground, each isolate in its unfenced plot of green, to each its vines, its flower beds, its stripling orange trees, and each and every one silent and in all seeming lifeless, cowering in the day-long glare of that vast and empty vault of blue, like a city of doll-houses which the children had outgrown . . .

XXIII

THE incorporators of Linda Lee Inc. were not, however, long left dependent on motor-cars that plied for hire and the orange-and-black outrage on wheels which was everywhere known as "Lynn Summerlad's bus."

One of Lontaine's first acts as president of the fledgling organization was to pay out ten thousand dollars of its capital for a startling blue-and-silver car, the whim of an absent-minded motion-picture star whose sudden flitting from threats of arrest on charges of bigamy had left the car on the hands of its builders, to be picked up at what Lontaine called a bargain price. Lucinda was disposed to hold the cost immaterial, but demurred about accepting it for her personal use; and the consideration urged by Summerlad, that the more eye-arresting the colour scheme the better the advertisement for Linda Lee, failed to move her. So Lontaine felt constrained to use it himself; and Fanny demurely professed resignation, pointing out that in such a conveyance no husband would ever dare pursue any but paths of conspicuous rectitude.

For herself Lucinda eventually selected a modest landaulet of dark maroon; but it saw little service, save on shopping trips, till she began to use it for daily transportation to and from the studio.

Weeks slipped stealthily away, the rainy season waned, a Spring ensued like an Eastern Summer, with lusty vegetation, lengthening days of dry heat, and nights deliciously cooled by airs that swept through every sunless hour from the highlands to the sea; while delays on delays accumu-

lated and still the day when "shooting" should begin lingered remotely down tomorrow's dim horizon.

Lontaine had leased studio space in the Zinn plant, which Summerlad recommended as the most modern and completely equipped on the Coast. For this the company was paying a weekly rental of fifteen hundred dollars. An expensive executive and technical staff, lacking only a director, was kicking heels of enforced idleness on full pay. A story had been selected, an old novel by a moderately popular author to which Zinn had in 1914 purchased all motion-picture rights outright for five hundred dollars and which he was now willing to part with for ten thousand as a special courtesy because he had taken such a mad fancy to Lontaine. A scenario writer, warranted by Zinn "the best in the business," had received five thousand for casting the story into continuity form, the labour of one whole week, and retired rejoicing to his hundred-and-fifty a week job in the Zinn scenario department. A reading of his bastard brain-child had persuaded Lucinda that continuity writing must be the mystery its adepts alleged; in fact, she couldn't understand the greater part of it, and what she did understand somewhat preyed upon her mind. But Lontaine seemed satisfied, Summerlad solaced her misgivings with the assurance that P. Potter Monahan simply couldn't write a poor continuity, and both agreed that Barry Nolan would know what to do to make it right when he got down to work on it.

Incidentally, he did: Nolan read it half-through, thoughtfully shied the manuscript out of a window, and dictated a continuity all his own, of which nobody but himself could make head or tail, and which at times in the course of its production seemed to puzzle even its perpetrator. But this Nolan was a resourceful lad and never hesitated to revise himself when at a loss: "That's out," he would inform his assistant; "we'll cover up the break with a subtitle. C'mon, let's shoot the close-ups;"

or it might be: "Got another angle on that now. Instead of that scene where she casts him out of her life forever, I'm going to stick in some business Leslie Carter used to do in the last act of *Zaza*. We'll get round to that later. What's next?"

But these revelations of an unique technique, justly celebrated as such, were reserved for the indefinite future. Notwithstanding that he was under contract to Linda Lee Inc. to begin work as soon as he had finished the production he was then making, Lucinda was to be hounded through her professional début by another megaphone than Barry Nolan's.

In the engagement of that one resided the only reason for the delays. While negotiations for his services (at twice as much pay as he had ever received before) were in progress, Nolan confidently expected to be free in a fortnight. The day he signed the contract he admitted that he might possibly keep them waiting a trifle longer. It was two months later when he at length notified Lontaine that he was running up to San Francisco for a few days' rest and relaxation but would positively be "on the lot" and ready to go to work, in another week.

In the meantime Lucinda had moved to the Hollywood Hotel, the Lontaines to a furnished bungalow nearby, where they vainly pressed her to join them. She thought it wiser to decline.

"I'm far too fond of both of you to risk living with you," she explained. "It's no good deliberately placing ourselves in a position to get fed to the teeth with one another. Besides, I've got to get accustomed to shifting for myself, and it's high time I was learning to breathe in a proper motion-picture atmosphere."

This the Hollywood provided to admiration. Summerlad assured Lucinda, and on her own observation she could well believe, that at one stage or another of their careers almost every motion-picture player of consequence in the country must have registered at this hotel. Many

continued to reside there, though no reason existed why they should not observe the custom of other happy holders of long-term contracts and move into homes of their own. Aside from such fixtures—and a non-professional element composed mainly of middle-aged folk with set incomes who had contracted the habit of spending their Winters and not much else in California—the hotel boasted a restless movement of birds of passage: stars of the legitimate stage brought on from New York to play in a single picture, lesser lights coming West at their own risk to solicit a "try-out;" playwrights and novelists with reputations in two continents declining to profit by the experience of innumerable predecessors, fatuously assuming that imagination, intelligence and honest workmanship had a dog's chance in the studios; directors enjoying their favorite pastime of hopping from Coast to Coast with everything paid; overlords of the cinema visiting the West Coast to look after their own or their rivals' fences and filch actors and directors from one another. These came and went by every trans-continental train. Remained the incurable addicts with yet another element, hardly less habitué but humbler, maintaining precarious residence in the hotel on meagre means, on remittances from home or God knew how (and, knowing, wept) hanging on desperately to hope of happier tomorrows, when they, too, would have their own cars call to take them to their daily toil, instead of trudging or trolleying from studio to studio in pursuit of the elusive day's work as an extra: a class largely feminine and insistently youthful.

With most of these Lucinda became acquainted by sight, with many she grew accustomed to exchange smiles and the time of day. They were a friendly lot, indomitably cheerful and brisk. If sheer joy of living didn't keep their eyes bright, belladonna did; their hand-painted smiles were unfailing; their slender, silken legs twinkled in vivacious by-play on veranda steps and in the public rooms; by every sign they were ever on the wing and jolly

glad. Lucinda liked them all involuntarily, and wished them well; and when she came to know some of them better her heart ached for them.

This was inevitable. The most glacial reserve must have melted to the warmth of such gayly casual overtures. It was good business to know Miss Linda Lee, and they made it their business without undue delay. She had not been twenty-four hours a sister-guest before all these young things knew an astonishing lot about her that wasn't so, and a deal that was.

Lucinda was a raw tenderfoot who was going to finance her own company, a prominent stage favorite trying her luck under an assumed name, a Baltimore society beauty with the motion-picture bee in her bonnet, nobody at all except the dear friend of this or that nationally known man, who was paying to put her into pictures to get rid of her. It didn't matter who or what she was, more than what was irrefutably established: that she was Linda Lee, she had simply sloughs of coin, she was to star in her own productions, Barry Nolan had been engaged to direct her, Lynn Summerlad had gone nutty about her; all of which summed up to this, that Lucinda was in a position to utter words of power whose fruit might be days and days of work at ten or fifteen per—who knew?—perhaps the miracle of a steady job!

They made up to her saucily or shyly, according to the style they believed became them best, with assurance or with humility, with ostensible indifference, and some in open desperation. But on one point they were all agreed: they wanted work. Lucinda spoke about two or three of them to Lontaine, who laughed and advised her to recommend them to Barry Nolan's assistant, when that far day dawned on which the question of casting subordinate rôles would be in order. She spoke to Lynn Summerlad, and was rewarded with a worried frown, the first sign of care she had ever detected in him, together with some well-chosen thoughts on the dangers of contracting haphazard

hotel acquaintanceships. Lucinda explained that she hadn't sought them, they had been practically forced upon her; she could see no merit in being rude and "upstage." Summerlad retorted darkly that one never could tell; the motion-picture colony harboured any number of queer birds; it wouldn't do for her of all women to pick up with a wrong one.

"First thing you know, they'll be trying to borrow money from you."

Lucinda was silent for want of a conscience that would sanction an indignant rejoinder.

"I was afraid of this when you moved into the hotel. But then I told myself not to be a fool, you weren't the sort to encourage total strangers."

With malice, Lucinda enquired absurdly: "Are you reproaching me with relaxing from the conventions of my former milieu, Mr. Summerlad?"

"You know very well what I mean, Linda."

"You think, perhaps, I'm growing to be a shade too free and easy?"

"If you must know, I do."

"But this is, after all, Hollywood."

"No excuse for doing as the Hollywoodenheads do."

"Then, I take it, you think it might be more discreet of me to stop going about with you alone."

Since the same roof no longer sheltered them, the Lontaines had ceased invariably to include Lucinda in their plans and gaddings, as when social courtesies were extended them by people whom Lontaine met in the way of business and to whom Lucinda was not known at all. So she was enjoying some little time to herself, when Summerlad's attentions permitted; and when they didn't, felt free to follow her inclination and dispense with chaperonage on occasion, irrespective of the looks of the thing. (If anything could be held to have any particular "looks" where principles of laissez-faire and assiduous attention to one's own concerns were so generally vogue.) Linda

Lee, furthermore, could do as she pleased when her pleasure must have been taboo to Mrs. Bellamy Druce.

"O Lord!" Summerlad groaned. "I might've known better than to start an argument with a woman."

"I don't relish being reproached by you for lack of decorum."

"Decorum! I'm only anxious you shan't get in with the wrong sort, be victimized or worse."

"Touching thoughtfulness on my behalf . . . But Lynn: what do you mean by 'worse'?"

"Not sure I know, myself. I don't want anything to happen to worry you."

"What could?"

"Oh, I don't know. If I did, I could take measures to prevent its happening. But not so long as you insist on living here. A hotel's no place for a woman alone. People all the time coming and going . . . Who knows who and what they are? You might be recognized."

"So that's what's on your mind?"

"I don't like to think of any outside influences working on you just now."

"Just now?"

"Distracting your attention from really important matters, like me and what you're going to do about me. I'm so desperately in love with you, Linda."

Lucinda said nothing for a little. She had been expecting this for days. Now that it came it found her, of course, unprepared. Nothing to complain of in that; a declaration of love always finds a woman unprepared, no matter how long she may have been preparing for it. The primitive instinct of flight from the male is deathless, though it manifest only as in that one brief moment of panic that Lucinda knew.

She was glad of the darkness of that section of the hotel veranda where they had been sitting for a quarter of an hour after returning from dîner à deux in the city. It had seemed early to part, as people interested in each

other reckon the age of an evening together—not much after ten—and since no one was visible on the veranda, Lucinda had suggested that Summerlad stop and chat a while. Now she wished she hadn't.

Not that it made much difference. This had been bound to come before long. One knew the signs in a man who had held his peace about as long as he could. Five weeks since that night when, in the Beverly Hills bungalow, she had concluded that Summerlad's interest in her was neither impersonal nor of a transitory nature . . .

An amazingly long time for him to wait, had she but known, a tribute to the sincerity of the passion she had inspired, to the respect in which he held her whose training had not been such as to encourage much respect for women in general. Almost anybody in Hollywood would have told her that Lynn Summerlad was "a fast worker." That no one had done so was probably due in most part to an impression that to carry such information were work of supererogation . . .

The worst of it was, she was glad.

How strange (and what proof of her heart's unique intricacy!) that she should be affected by such paradoxical displeasure in the pleasure it gave her to hear Lynn profess a passion of which she had been so long and well aware; as if it grated upon some slumbering sense of what was fitting; as if any reason today existed why Lynn shouldn't be in love with her and, for the matter of that, she with him (only, of course, she wasn't) or why he need hesitate to speak and she be loath to listen . . .

"Well, Linda?"

She put away her pensiveness, smiling softly in the darkness that enfolded them, smiling to see Summerlad bending forward in his chair, whose arm just failed to touch the arm of hers, anxiously searching her face for a clue to her mind, but with the anxiety of impatience more than the anxiety of doubt. He wanted to have her in his

arms. A pleasant place to be, perhaps; but she wasn't ready yet, she was not yet sure . . .

"Well, my friend!" she said in amused indulgence—"so it seems you love me."

"How long have you known it?"

"Quite as long as you have loved me."

"And you——?"

"I don't know yet."

He ventured too confidently: "I don't want to hurry you——"

"You couldn't, Lynn. And—you won't be wise if you count on me."

"You don't mind my loving you, Linda?"

"No. I think it makes me happy."

"Then I'm going to count on you—unless you want me to think you're merely amusing yourself."

"But you don't think that. So be patient."

"I'm not at all sure patience and love are even related."

"Then I'm afraid the only kind of love you know is not the kind that lasts."

"If so, I'm glad I've known none that lasted; that leaves me free to be truly in love with you."

"That's rather clever of you, Lynn, almost too clever."

"I've got to be clever, I guess, to make you love me."

"Lynn, I'm afraid you're artful. Yes—and much too experienced! You'd better go now before you talk me into something that isn't real and . . . If you do love me, you aren't wanting anything else."

"You'd really like to get rid of me?"

"For tonight, yes. I need to be alone to think—about you."

"Fair enough—if that's a promise."

"It's a promise."

Lucinda stood up, a maneuvre that lifted Summerlad unwillingly out of his chair. He took her hand and

sketched an intention of using it to draw her to him. But she laughed quietly, shaking her head.

"Good night, my dear."

"I've never tried to kiss you, Linda . . . "

"And won't, I know, till I want you to."

"Confound you! That's what I get for giving you an opening to put me on my honour."

"It's more than you'd have got—or deserved—if you hadn't."

His lips barely failed to find her hand; Lucinda had drawn away in the nick of time.

"Don't go before you've answered my question, Lynn."

"Question?"

"What I'm to do about these unlucky young women?"

"Hoped you'd forgotten them."

"I can't."

"You've got too soft a heart, I'm afraid, Linda. I don't see why you always let it rule your head—except about me."

"Perhaps it's a good sign, though."

"I'm sure I don't know how to advise you. Obviously you can't turn Linda Lee Inc. into a refuge for misguided females."

"There's one girl in especial I'm worried about, Lynn. She seems so ill and wretched. And even so, she's pretty. I'm sure a little happiness would make her radiant. Why can't we find or make a chance for her somewhere?"

"Once you start that sort of thing, the whole pack will be on your back, they won't give you a minute's peace. But if you insist . . . What's her type?"

"Olive brune; about my height; and the loveliest, most tragic eyes . . . "

"Any experience?"

"Yes. She told me she'd been working in the East, but her health broke down and the doctors advised California. She'd been out here before, I gathered, but not in pictures. At least—I'm not sure—that's what I understood.

She only got in last night, and they put her at my table in the dining-room, so we met at luncheon today."

"Lost no time boning you for a job——"

"She didn't suggest anything of the sort. I don't believe she's heard yet about my having my own company. All she said was, she hoped she wouldn't have too much trouble finding work, she needed it so desperately."

"Well, since you make a point of it, I'll see what I can do—speak to Zinn about her. What's her name?"

"Miss Marquis—Nelly Marquis, I think she said."

Summerlad had just then opened his cigarette case. After a thoughtful pause he shut it with a snap, neglecting to help himself to a cigarette, and replaced it in his pocket. Then becoming sensible of the query in Lucinda's attitude, he asked in a dull voice: "What name did you say?"

"Nelly Marquis. Why? Do you know her?"

"I know a good deal about her. Rather a bad lot, I'm afraid. Look here, Linda: I wish you'd drop her."

"Don't be stupid, Lynn."

"I'm not. I mean it. I can't very well tell you what I know, but I do wish you'd take my word for it and cut this woman out. She's really not the sort you can afford to get mixed up with."

"You're sure, Lynn? You really want me to understand she is—what you're trying to avoid saying?"

"Yes—and worse. I'm in earnest, Linda. I think you might trust me. After all, I ought to know my way about Hollywood, I've lived in it long enough."

"Of course I trust you, Lynn. I'm sorry though. I felt so sorry for her, she didn't seem one of the usual sort."

"She isn't." Summerlad gave a curt, meaning laugh. "But you said you wanted to get rid of me, and I think I'd better go before the old curiosity gets in its fine work and you ask me questions I wouldn't want to answer."

He possessed himself of Lucinda's hands again and kissed them ardently, while she looked on with lenient

eyes, more than half in love already. Why, then, must she persist in hanging fire with him? Was it merely crude, primordial instinct prompting her to withstand the male till his will prevailed? Or was there something wanting in the man, some lack divined by a sense in her subtle, anonymous, and inarticulate?

Infinitely perplexed, Lucinda lingered on where Summerlad had left her, near the far end of the veranda, where it rounded the rotund corner of the hotel. Here there was always shade by day, thanks to a screen of subtropical foliage, by night a deeper gloom than elsewhere on the veranda, and at all times a better show of privacy.

The engine roared as Summerlad's car swung down the drive, then changed its tune to a thick drone as it took the boulevard, heading away for Beverly Hills. Still Lucinda rested as she was, absently observing the play of street lights on leaves whose stir was all but imperceptible in the softly flowing air.

Impossible to understand herself, to read her own heart, make up her mind . . .

A thin trickle of sound violated the mid-evening hush, a broken and gusty beating of stifled sobs that for a time she heard without attention, then of a sudden identified.

Windows of guest-rooms looked out on the veranda, but Lucinda had made sure these were closed and lightless before permitting Summerlad's wooing to become ardent. The semi-round room on the corner, however, had French windows let in at an angle which she could not see. After a moment she moved quietly to investigate, and discovered that one of these was open, that the sobbing had its source in a shapeless heap upon the floor in the darkness beyond.

Entering and kneeling, Lucinda touched gently the shoulder of the stricken woman. "Please!" she begged. "Can I do anything?"

In a convulsive tremor the woman choked off her sobs

and lifted her face to stare vacantly. Enough light seeped in from the street to reveal the features of Nelly Marquis.

Her voice broke huskily on the hush: "Who are you?"

"Miss Lee—Linda Lee. Can't I do something——?"

With startling fury the girl struck aside Lucinda's hands and at the same time flung herself back and away.

"No!" she cried thickly. "No, no, no! Not you! Go away—please go!"

"I only wanted to help you, if I could," Lucinda explained, getting to her feet. "If you're unhappy—I'm so sorry——"

The movement must have been misinterpreted, for the girl sprang up like a threatened animal.

"I don't want your help!" she stormed throatily. "I don't want anything to do with you—only to be left alone!" She flung herself at Lucinda as if to thrust her out by force. "Go! go! go!" she screamed. Then the window slammed.

"Poor thing!" Lucinda told herself—"she must have heard . . . "

XXIV

THERE was at this time little room in Lucinda's inner life for other people's troubles, she was much too agreeably engrossed in doting on this radiant new avatar of Linda Lee, victress in a form of duel of which Summerlad was reputed a master who had never known defeat. Rumours current of his success with women had found her credulous and lenient; mortal vanity saw to that. It feeds on strange foods, vanity, it waxes fat on inconsistencies. Think as well as you will of yourself, you shall not find unacceptable the belief that one well loved by many has been laid low by love of you alone . . . And indeed a great part of that indecision at which Lucinda in those days played so daintily was due to the knowledge, unformulated in her consciousness but none the less exercising constant influence on her moods, that she was less in love with Lynn than in love with being loved by Lynn Summerlad the idolized.

In many ways admirable, a fine animal who kept himself always exquisitely fit, intelligent enough to share or seem to share her every taste and prejudice, Lynn had laid a spell upon her mind no less than on her senses. The minor faults of which she had earlier been aware, the little things he sometimes did or said that jarred, he had amended. Or she was no longer competent to perceive them . . .

So she put away all care on account of the strange woman whose unhappiness had excited her quick compassion, and let fancy have its fling at the dissipation of thinking how blessed was her lot, how supremely distinguished as fortune's favorite she was who had every-

thing, youth, beauty, health and riches, and to whom all things good were granted, love, friends, admiration and envy of the general, and—never to be misprized—a life, in its present phase, of vicissitudes highly diverting.

And if she knew seasons when memories twinged like an old wound slow to mend beneath its scar, she found a certain casuistry to console regrets and compound with conscience, holding herself spiritually, as in material circumstances, a free agent, free to listen to any man, if she would, and if she would to love him. The phantom fiction of a legal bond, all that was left of her married life, she could do away at will, at little cost in inconvenience . . .

That morning, as every morning now, she woke with a smile responsive to the smiling promise of the day; and when she had lazily girded on her armour against fault-finding eyes, called for her car and sallied forth to while away yet another day of idleness.

Her rooms were so situate, at the end of one wing of the hotel and on the lower floor, that to reach the main entrance she had to pass the corner-room now occupied by Nelly Marquis; and malicious luck would have it that the two should meet.

The Marquis girl had been out and was returning with a small packet gripped in a shabbily gloved hand. A well-made woman with a graceful carriage, her face held elements of beauty of a wild, sweet sort, but dimmed and wasted by despondency and impaired health. Today the dark rings under her eyes were deeper, the eyes themselves more desperate than when their look had first appealed to Lucinda's sympathies. And seeing her so, Lucinda with a solicitous cry—"Why, Miss Marquis!"—paused and extended an impulsive hand.

The girl swerved away from the hand, shrinking to the wall, her scant natural colour ebbing till the rouge was livid on cheeks and lips, while her eyes grew hard and hot.

"Well!" she said sullenly—"what do you want?"

Confounded by this proof of a hostility as pertinacious as it was perverse, Lucinda faltered: "But—you are ill——"

"Well: and if I am, what's that to you?" The words uttered in a level tone nevertheless seemed to force explosively past the tremulous, waxen lips. "Oh, don't worry your head about me; think about yourself. Don't forget you can be contaminated by a creature like me, don't forget"—she accomplished a singularly true reproduction of Summerlad's tone—"I'm 'really not the sort you can afford to get mixed up with'!"

"I'm so sorry you heard, Miss Marquis. Of course neither of us had any idea you were——"

"Eavesdropping! why don't you say it? I'm not ashamed."

"But are you fair to me? I meant you no harm, I didn't say—what you resent—you know."

The girl gave a grimace of pure hate. "No," she snarled—"*you* didn't say anything unkind, you were too busy posing as Lady Bountiful to pass uncharitable remarks! But he—he said enough—enough for me. Oh, I'm not saying he didn't tell the truth! I'm 'a bad lot,' all right—a rotten bad lot, if you want to know—and I'll be worse before I'm better. So you watch out and keep away from me—d'you hear? I want and warn you to keep away from me. I don't want your pity or your charity or any of your holier-than-thou butting in—all I want's just to be let alone. Any time I change my mind, I'll send you an engraved notice . . . I trust I make myself clear, Miss Lee!"

"Yes, thank you," said Lucinda coolly—"quite"—and went her way.

Insolence so patently hysterical could neither hurt nor harden her heart. She consigned the affront to the limbo of the insignificant, and had put all thought of it away

when, fifteen minutes later, her car brought her to the Lontaine bungalow.

Here Lucinda had to rout Fanny out of bed and make her dress, against her protestations that she'd been on a party the night before, with Harry and some people, so needed rest and kind words more than exercise and open air.

The reflection cast a shadow as transitory as a flying cloud's upon the bright tranquillity of Lucinda's temper, that Fanny, by her own frank account, had been going in for parties rather heavily of late, and it wasn't doing her any good. Not that she showed ill effects more than in a feverish look that really enhanced her blonde prettiness. But with Fanny's insatiable appetite for the sort of thing that she called fun . . .

After all, that was Fanny's concern, and Harry's. One had confidence in their ultimate good sense, in their knowing where to draw the line, when to call a halt.

From the Lontaine bungalow the two proceeded to the Zinn Studios, having nothing better to do and thinking to pick up Harry there and run him down to the Alexandria for luncheon. But the shabbily furnished little office assigned to Linda Lee Inc. was empty, the blue-and-white car was missing from the yard, and nobody had any information concerning Lontaine's whereabouts or probable return.

This was nothing unusual, Lontaine was always on the wing, blowing to and fro between Los Angeles and the studio; but his absence left the young women at loose ends until Fanny suggested that they look up Lynn, find out what he was doing, and make him stop it.

Summerlad's company was busy doing nothing at all on one of the enclosed stages, contentedly lounging in and about a bizarre ball-room set and waiting for something to happen; the occupation which, Lucinda by this time had come to know, earns the motion-picture actor about ninety per cent. of his wages; the other ten being paid

him for actual acting. Neither Lynn nor Joseph Jacques, his director, was in evidence, but the cameraman said the two of them had retired to the director's office for a conference.

To the office Lucinda and Fanny accordingly repaired and—their knock being answered by a morose growl—there discovered Summerlad, in elaborate evening clothes, tilted back in a desk-chair, a thoughtful scowl on his handsome, painted face, with Jacques, a mild-mannered, slender young cinema sultan in riding-breeches and boots, sitting on the desk itself and moodily drumming its side with his heels. These got upon their feet in such confusion that Fanny was moved wickedly to enquire whether Lucinda or herself had been the subject of their confabulations. "And," she further stipulated, sternly, "what you were saying about whichever of us. I never saw two people look more guilty of scandal."

"It wasn't scandal," Jacques insisted with an air of too transparent virtue. "We had been talking about Miss Lee, though."

"Wondering if you'd care to be an angel to us, Linda."

"Look out, Linda," Fanny warned. "when a man begs a woman to be an angel to him, he's generally working her up to do something she oughtn't."

"What is it?" Lucinda enquired, laughing at Summerlad's dashed expression.

"I'm not sure you ought to, at that," he replied—"in your position, that is. But it'd be sure angelic of you."

"Help us out of the worst sort of a hole, Miss Lee," Jacques added. "I wish you would."

"But what is it?"

"Oh, nothing at all!" Summerlad assured her with a laugh that decried the very idea—"all we want you to do is forget you're a star, or going to be, and play a little part with me in this picture we're doing now."

"But how can I? I'd love to—you know that, Lynn—

but we've no way of knowing when Mr. Nolan will be ready."

"That's just it, Miss Lee. It isn't any part at all, so to speak, we'll only need you three or four days; what Mr. Summerlad's afraid of is, you'll think it beneath your dignity."

"Is it such an undignified part?"

"Well, you'd have to play second fiddle to Alice Drake."

Miss Drake was Summerlad's leading woman pro tem. Lucinda made a laughing face.

"Is that all? Going on the fuss you make, I thought you'd at least want me to play a Sennett Bathing Beauty. I see no reason in the world why I should balk at playing second to as good an actress as Miss Drake."

"Well, not only that, but the part isn't big enough for you, Linda—only a bit, you know, so little it's scarcely worth mentioning."

"Then who will know or care who acts in it? I'd perfectly love to do it for you, if you think I can."

"Knew she would!" Jacques crowed. "What'd I tell you? A thoroughbred's a thoroughbred every time!"

"You are a brick, Linda, and no mistake. You've no idea what a load you've taken off our minds. You see, this part, while nothing to speak of in itself, is awfully important to the picture in one way; it absolutely demands somebody who's got everything you've got."

"If we stick in anybody that hasn't," Jacques interpolated, "the whole works will postolutely go ker-flooey."

"We did the best we could," Summerlad pursued, "had Gloria Glory engaged; but this morning, when she was to report for work, she sent round word she had ptomaine poisoning and was being taken to a hospital."

"Gloria Glory?" Fanny put in. "Why, I saw her down at Sunset last night. And the only thing the matter with her then was *not* ptomaine poisoning."

"Too much party," Jacques interpreted. "I had the

hunch, all right. Gloria sure do crook a mean elbow when she gets it unlimbered."

"Then you'll do it, Linda?"

"I'll love doing it. What do you want me to wear?"

"You'll do!" Summerlad chuckled. "Only a natural-born picture actress would ask what to wear before wanting to know what the part was. You begin tomorrow if you can get your costume ready, and you'll only want one, a riding habit."

"Cross-saddle costume, Miss Lee," Jacques explained. "White breeches and a pair of swell boots—you know—like the society dames wear when they go hoss-backing in Central Park, New York, if you've ever seen 'em."

"Yes," said Lucinda soberly—"once or twice."

"Have you got a riding costume, Linda?"

"No; but I daresay I can pick one up in Los Angeles this afternoon."

"Do that, will you, Miss Lee, if you can? And be on the lot at eight tomorrow, made up, please. It's a forty-mile run to the location, and we want to get there early's we can so's to get all set to shoot when the light's right."

Actor and director pranced grateful attendance on the two women as they returned to their motor-car; and when it had vanished down the drive, Summerlad fell upon Jacques and shook him fervently by the hand.

"You're a true friend, Joe!" he declared in mock-emotional accents. "I'll never forget what you've done for me this day."

"Worked out pretty, didn't it?" the director grinned. "What d'you know about them dames walking in on us, just when we'd got it all doped? But you always were a fool for luck, Lynn, s'far's the skirts are concerned—you old hyena!"

"I am this flop, anyway," Summerlad mused with a far-away look. "Those white riding-breeches were a regular inspiration, Joe: if she finds a pair before night, I miss my guess."

"Well, it don't do to ride your luck too hard. You've got all afternoon with the coast clear—maybe! Get your make-up off and beat it quick."

XXV

AS it turned out, however, Lucinda experienced no great difficulty in fitting herself acceptably with a ready-made costume of white linen for cross-saddle riding, and light tan boots of soft leather.

The prospect of at last doing real work before a camera, after her long wait since falling in with Lontaine's scheme, inspired a quiet elation. She had already been elaborately tested and re-tested, of course, by the cameraman under contract with Linda Lee Inc.; she had ceased to feel self-conscious in the fierce white light of the Kleigs, and was familiar almost to satiety with the sensation, at first so nightmarish, of sitting in a darkened chamber and watching herself move to and fro upon a lighted screen. This last, however, had given Lucinda confidence in the photographic value of her good looks; and she had furthermore learned, through measuring her unproved abilities by those of established screen actresses daily displayed to the millions, not to be apprehensive of scoring an utter failure when her time came to entertain with the mobile shadow of her self audiences that had paid to be amused.

So she felt assured of doing well enough in her work with Summerlad. And if her mood was serious, when she alighted at the hotel and gave a bellboy her purchases, it was because she was thinking of nothing but her immediate purpose, which was to try on her costume all complete, with hat, boots, gloves and riding-crop, before a mirror, partly to make sure every detail was as it should be, but mostly to satisfy herself that she would look as fetching as she felt she must.

It wasn't till she found herself in the corridor leading

to her suite that Lucinda remembered Nelly Marquis; she hadn't given the girl two thoughts since morning, and in all likelihood wouldn't have given her another had she not met the bellboy returning from delivering the parcels to her maid, and paused to tip him in front of the door to the corner room. Then, as he thanked her and passed on, she noticed that the door was slightly ajar, the room beyond dark with early dusk, and finally, where the light from the corridor struck in across the threshold, a white hand at rest upon the floor, a woman's hand, palm up, the fingers slightly contracted, absolutely still. A startling thing to see . . .

For a few seconds Lucinda stood entranced with premonitions of horror. Then she moved to the door and rapped on it gently. There was no response, the hand didn't stir. She called guardedly: "Miss Marquis!"—and when nobody answered laid hold of the knob. The door met a soft obstacle when less than half-open, and would yield no farther. The light now disclosed an arm bare to the elbow. With a shiver Lucinda stepped in and groped along the wall till her fingers found and turned the switch illuminating the central chandelier.

Nelly Marquis lay supine, breathing if at all so lightly that the movement of her bosom, beneath the ragged lace of a dingy pink silk négligé, was imperceptible. Her lids, half lowered, showed only the whites of rolled up eyes, her lips were parted and discoloured, her painted pallor was more ghastly even than it had been in the morning. On the evidence of her body's posture in relation to the partly opened door, she had been taken suddenly ill, had rushed to call for assistance, and had fallen in the act of turning the knob.

Lucinda shut the door, knelt, touched the girl's wrist, and found it icy cold. But her bosom was warm, the heart in it faintly but indisputably fluttering.

In relief and pity, she essayed to take the girl up in her

arms and carry her to the bed, but found the dead weight too great.

Casting round at random for something in the nature of a restorative, smelling salts or the like, she saw nothing that would serve, at first, only a disarray of garments and other belongings characteristic of natures in which care for appearances and personal neatness has become atrophied through one cause or another—if it ever existed. But she noticed absently that one of the windows stood wide to the veranda, and went to close it and draw the shade before pursuing her search.

Then, in the bathroom, she found a bottle of aggressive toilet water and a pint flask of whiskey, half emptied.

Alternately moistening the pale lips with the whiskey and bathing the brows and temples with the pungent water, she observed for the first time a reddish bruise under the left eye, the mark of a blow, possibly sustained in falling. But there was nothing nearby that the girl could have struck to inflict such a hurt except the doorknob, and if she had struck this with such force she must have slammed the door.

It was puzzling . . .

Her ministrations eventually began to take effect. The bleached lips quivered, closed, then opened and closed several times. The woman's lashes trembled and curtained her eyes. Lucinda went to the bathroom for water. When she returned with half a glassful liberally laced with whiskey, Nelly Marquis was conscious; but her eyes, with pupils inordinately expanded, remained witless until she had drained the glass with convulsive gulps and Lucinda had set it aside.

"Do you think you're strong enough now to get to bed, if I help?"

The girl nodded: " . . . *try,*" she whispered. Using all her strength, Lucinda succeeded in getting Nelly Marquis on her feet. About this time the clouded faculties began to clear. Clinging to Lucinda's arm, Nelly started

as if in a spasm of fear, darted swift glances of terror round the room, then turned a look of perplexity to Lucinda.

"Where is he?" the whisper demanded. "Has he—has he gone?"

"There is no one else here, nothing to be afraid of. Come: let me help you to bed."

Recognition dawned as she spoke, with a movement of feeble fury the girl threw Lucinda's arm away, but deprived of its support staggered to the foot of the bed, to which she clung, quaking.

"You!" she cried— "what you doing here?"

"The door was open, I saw you lying senseless on the floor. I couldn't go on and leave you like that. You'd have done as much for me."

"Oh! would I? A lot you know!" Her knees seemed about to buckle; will-power alone kept Nelly Marquis from sinking; yet she persisted: "I suppose I ought to thank you. Well: much obliged, I'm sure. Is that enough?"

"Quite enough. I've no wish to annoy you. Only, let me suggest, you need a doctor. May I ask the office to call one?"

"When I want a doctor, I'll call him myself. Good night."

"I'm sorry," said Lucinda simply.

With no choice other than to go, she went. But the vision she carried away, of Nelly Marquis glaring at her with eyes malevolent, her frail body vibrating so that it shook the bed, must have haunted Lucinda's conscience all evening long had she let the affair drop then and there.

Returning to her room, she telephoned the office and asked for the hotel physician. The clerk reported that the doctor was out, but promised to advise him of her call as soon as he came in.

Upwards of an hour later a knock ushered in a quiet

young man with weary, understanding eyes, who attended gravely to what Lucinda had to tell him.

"She seems to have taken such an inexplicable dislike to me," Lucinda wound up, "I'm sure she won't see you if she knows you come through me. But the girl is really ill and needs help. So, I thought, perhaps you might find someone else in the hotel who knows her and could get her to consent to see you."

"I fancy I know her well enough myself to excuse a friendly call," the physician answered. "She's an old patient of mine, though she hasn't been in Hollywood for some time, I believe."

"Then you must know what's the matter with her . . . "

"Yes, I know . . . But it would be unprofessional to tell you, of course, Miss Lee."

"Then tell me this much: that you can help her."

"I'm not sure of that. Not unless she's willing. To do her any real good, I'd have to have her under observation for some weeks. And cases like hers are peculiar, peculiarly strong-headed . . . However, I'll see if I can do anything with her now, and let you know."

Three minutes after he had left, he knocked again.

"Too late, Miss Lee," he reported. "Nelly Marquis checked out about a quarter of an hour ago, they tell me at the desk—called for an auto and left no address."

XXVI

THE indigene of Southern California has long since ceased to regard with much interest the publicly practised tribal customs of those clans which herd upon the motion-picture reservation. He no longer thinks he's seeing life when he comes upon troops of fairy policemen rapturously chasing their trails by broad daylight, or woebegone gentlemen with too much trousers popping out of manholes in public thoroughfares, or painfully unconscious sweethearts in broad-minded evening dress at high noon fondling each other in front of, say, the Hollywood Hotel. He no more knows a thrill when motor-loads of revellers in giddy costume and with sanguine noses blow by his unromantic bungalow at breakneck speed, preceded or followed by other cars filled with bored proletaires in workaday clothes, among them one embracing affectionately the slim young limbs of a camera tripod. And if he should chance to observe his next-door neighbour lamming the everlasting daylights out of his wife on the front lawn, he would make sure there was no camera within range before telephoning for the police.

A month of Hollywood had so accustomed Lucinda to such sights that she became a part of them, at least in as far as involved coursing through the streets in full make-up, without any sense of making herself unduly conspicuous.

She even forgot to think it strange that she, Lucinda Druce, should not resent being made love to unprofessionally, that is to say without an eye to the camera, by a

man with rouge on cheeks and lips and eyelashes beaded with mascaro.

If the feeling that she had cast her lines in strange places was quick to wear off, in those three days of work with the Summerlad company, the fun of it wasn't. Lucinda threw herself into the detail of every hour with tremendous zest, and liked it all as she seldom had liked anything before.

To rise hours before the time at which use had habited her to waking, rout the drowsiness from her flesh with a cold plunge, dress hastily in her becoming white costume, snatch a bite of breakfast and dash out into the cool glow of morning sunlight to rendezvous at the studio; to pick up Lynn and Fanny for company on a cross-country race to a wild canyon of the Sierra Madre; to change to horseback when the going grew perilous for motor travel, and ride five miles farther up a trail that now ran level with the rushing waters of a mountain stream, now climbed dizzily above it on rocky ledges barely wide enough to afford foothold for one horse at a time, ending in a lovely wilderness spot which Jacques had selected because, he said, it hadn't been "shot to death"; to idle, chat and giggle with Lynn, Fanny and Alice Drake during the long delays devoted by Jacques to making up his mind what he wanted the company to do in preference to the action indicated in the continuity which he was politely presumed to be producing; to lunch al fresco, grouped round a blanket on which a decidedly rude and hearty picnic meal was spread; to frolic through a few minutes of make-believe while the camera clicked and Jacques bawled directions through a megaphone; then to drive back in the evening lull, with lights breaking out in lilac dusk like fireflies in a tinted mist; to get home so weary that she could hardly keep awake long enough to wolf down the dinner for which she was ravening, then to fling herself into the warm, all-obliterating haven of bed; and all the while to be falling more and more madly in love but still

practising delectable, self-tantalizing self-denial: this wasn't work in any sense, but play, sheer play of a most gorgeous sort and of which surely one could never tire.

If this were all there was to motion-picture acting, then Lucinda could not wonder that, as she was one day informed by a crusty veteran of the colony: "Bums may turn revivalists, and lawyers honest, but there ain't no known cure for a lens lizard."

In the name of all things reasonable! why sigh to be cured of a vocation at once so profitable and so enthralling?

There was another side to the business, of course, there had to be. One knew it couldn't be all beer and skittles, one heard dark hints of the uglier side, one even caught glimpses of it and its workings now and then, as in the instance of Nelly Marquis; but awareness of it had no perceptible effect upon the spirits of those with whom Lucinda found herself associated for the time being. Some of the younger members of the acting division seemed to take life a thought seriously—"life" meaning, as a rule, themselves—but the more experienced, and the men of the technical groups, the directors, cameramen, and their assistants, the property men and jacks-of-all-trades, went about their work with jests ever on their lips. Lucinda heard few orders given or acknowledged other than in the semi-jocular vein known as "kidding." Even Jacques, whose office clothed him with a certain dignity, by which he was intermittently depressed, seemed in his most earnest moments to find it difficult to express himself in terms of becoming gravity. The common attitude summed up to this: that making pictures was all a huge lark and (strictly between those engaged in it) a darned good joke on the people who paid the bills.

As for the part she was supposed to play in this picture of Summerlad's, Lucinda never managed to secure an intelligible exposition of its nature or its relation to the plot. Both Summerlad and Jacques seemed strangely vague in

their own minds concerning it, and Alice Drake frankly confessed she hadn't read the 'script and hadn't the faintest notion what the picture was about. She did what Jacques told her to do, and did it very well, and so long as there were no complaints and her weekly cheque turned up on time, she didn't care (she said) a thin red hoot about the story. Neither was this an uncommon attitude, she averred; not infrequently directors imposed it upon the actors and actresses working under them. There was George Loane Tucker, who had directed *The Miracle Man;* Miss Drake had worked for him and could testify concerning his methods. He never told any of the cast what the story was, only what he wanted them to wear and do and how and when to do it; that was all. He had even invented a secret system of numbering the "takes," so that he alone could properly assemble the thousand or so separate scenes and close-ups which go to make up the average motion-picture when photography on it is finished, scenes which are never by any chance photographed in consecutive order. Nor was Tucker the only one . . .

Later on, in the projection-rooms of the Zinn Studios, Lucinda saw the "rushes" of the scenes in which she had played; "rushes" being the first positive prints made from the uncut negative: "takes" running anywhere from twice to a hundred times the length of the scene to be finally incorporated into the finished picture and disclosed to the public. She was well content with the way she had done what little had been given her to do, but was left in the dark as to what it was all about. And in the final cutting and editing, that sequence of scenes dropped out of the film altogether. So that nobody ever knew, except possibly Summerlad and Jacques . . .

To the best of her observation her rôle was that of an involuntary vamp. Not vampire: vamp. No other term will serve so well. Originally a derisive diminutive, the usage of the studios has endowed this monosyllable with a significance all its own, not readily definable. A vamp

no longer means of necessity a vampire, a scarlet-mouthed seductress of strong men's souls. A vamp may be a far more socially possible person that that, in fact any attractive woman who comports herself toward another woman's man consistently with the common amenities of civilized intercourse.

As an involuntary vamp, then, Miss Lee was to meet Mr. Summerlad under romantic circumstances and innocently wean him from strict fidelity to the charms of his betrothed (or it may have been his wife) Miss Drake. Of this situation Miss Drake was in due course to become cognizant. What was to happen after that between Miss Drake and Mr. Summerlad was no concern of the involuntary vamp's. Furthermore, she never learned.

The said romantic circumstances proved sufficiently thrilling to bring about an early wedding in most films. Miss Lee was run away with by her horse while taking an early morning canter in mountains conveniently adjacent to her family's suburban villa. Mr. Summerlad, similarly engaged in health-giving equestrianism, happened along at the right time to observe her peril, pursue, and snatch her bodily from her saddle to his arms at the very instant when her mount was plunging headlong over a precipice. After which he escorted her to her home, and on the way the two indulged in such normal love-making as was only to be expected when the facts of the case were taken into consideration.

Jacques used up all of one day and two-thirds of the next staging and shooting the runaway and the rescue scenes, in none of which either Lucinda or Summerlad figured in person. Lucinda, it is true, was photographed from several angles, riding along the mountainside trail at a point where it was broad enough for her horse, with safety to its rider, to shy and start to run away. The animal was an unusually intelligent, perfectly trained and docile trick-horse that, given the right signals, would perform a number of feats such as shying, running away, stopping

short, falling dead under its rider. And Lucinda was a good horsewoman, though not good enough for such rough and really dangerous riding as would be required after the start of the runaway. A double was therefore provided for her, a tough and wiry young person of about her height and weight who made her living by risking her life in just such ways, and who, with Lucinda's white coat, hat and boots added to her own white riding-breeches, passed well enough for Lucinda in "distance shots."

A double was likewise provided for Summerlad, though he was a superb rider and vigorously asserted his right to take what chances he pleased with his own neck. But Jacques explained it wasn't Summerlad's neck he cared about, it was finishing a picture in which eighty thousand dollars had already been sunk and for whose completion Summerlad's services would be required for four more weeks. Thereafter he could break his neck as often and in as many places as he liked, for all of Jacques.

So Summerlad held his peace and his place at Lucinda's side, well out of harm's way, while Jacques went ahead and directed the rescue.

Runaway, pursuit and rescue were all staged on a ledge-like trail three hundred feet above the boulder-strewn bed of the brawling stream, and were photographed simultaneously by three cameras, from the river-bed shooting upwards, from the opposite side of the canyon on a level with the trail, and from the trail itself but at a distance great enough to prevent the fact that doubles were used from becoming evident when the pictures were projected.

It was all honestly hazardous and ticklish work, rendered doubly and trebly so by the fact that each part of the action had to be replayed over and over again to satisfy Jacques, an old hand at "stunt stuff" and a painstaking one.

Lucinda's heart, as she looked on, was in her mouth more often than not. It made no difference that it was

all played at a far slower tempo than would appear when it was screened; the projection-machine flashes the pictures across the screen at a faster rate than that at which they are taken; consequently it is only necessary to crank the camera at slower than normal speed to attain an effect of terrific speed in projection. Fast or slow, it was risky enough in all conscience; and Lucinda was more than glad when the last repetition had been shot and Jacques gave orders to shift to a location near the mouth of the canyon.

For those scenes of sentiment which Lucinda and Summerlad were to play in person, Jacques wanted the contrast of richer and more abundant vegetation, and the location he selected brought the party at length to a point below that at which the automobiles had been forced to stop.

Here Lucinda and Summerlad were photographed time and again, in distance shots, medium shots, and close-ups, riding side by side, registering the dawn of a more intimate interest each in the other, dismounting to rest in a sweet sylvan glade by the side of the stream, and finally in each other's arms, with Miss Drake riding up to surprise them as they kissed.

Whether by intention or because such scenes are a commonplace of picture-making, Lucinda could not say, but she had not been in any way prepared for the fact that she was to be kissed by Summerlad; whereas she had been flirting with him decorously but dangerously for the best part of three days. Now suddenly, toward the close of the third, she was instructed to permit his embrace, submit to his kiss, and kiss him in response.

She made no demur, for that would have seemed silly, but did her best to ape the matter-of-course manner of all hands, and went through it with all the stoicism, when the camera wasn't trained on her, that was compatible with the emotions she must show when it was.

But her heart was thumping furiously when she felt Summerlad's arms for the first time enfold her; and when,

murmuring terms of endearment appropriate to both the parts the man was playing, he put his lips to hers, she knew, both despite and because of the tumult of her senses, that she was lost. Control of the situation between them passed in that instant from her hands to his.

Released at length, she looked round, dazed and breathless, to find that, during the business of the kiss, a party of uninvited onlookers had been added to their professional audience.

A motor-car had slipped up on the group and stopped, and one of its two passengers had alighted and drawn near to watch.

This was Bellamy.

XXVII

MOMENTARILY stunned eyes saw the face of Bellamy only as a swimming blur of flesh-colour shaded by a smile of hateful mockery. Then, not unlike rays of the sun escaping from complete eclipse, Lucinda's wits struggled from out a dark penumbra of dismay to make new terms with the world—or try to, under the handicap of panicy conviction that it was all up now with Linda Lee.

Such was her first thought . . . In another minute or two, as soon as she was able to acknowledge what she might not much longer ignore, Bellamy's attitude of patient but persevering attention, everybody present must learn that she had no right title to the style by which she had palmed herself off on Hollywood; by nightfall the studios would be agog over the news that Linda Lee was no less a personage than Mrs. Bellamy Druce.

She was curiously disturbed less because of the circumstances in which her husband had found her out than on account of the menace he presented to the plans she had of late begun to nurse so tenderly. All at once Lucinda discovered how passionately her heart had become implicated in this adventure, how deeply the ambition had struck its roots into her being to win by native ability unaided to those starry eminences whereon the great ones of the cinema sojourned. To hear the inevitable verdict read upon her career before it was fairly launched, "Another screen-struck society woman!" were an affront to decent self-esteem by the side of which it seemed a trivial matter that Bellamy, no more her husband but by grace of the

flimsiest of civil fictions, had caught her in the act of kissing another man.

Notwithstanding, her cheeks were hot, she experienced infinite vexation of the knowledge; and—all her efforts to recover hindered by a silence damnably eloquent of general sensitiveness to a piquant and intriguing moment—she was shaken by gusts of impotent irritation in whose grasp she could almost without a qualm have murdered Bellamy where he stood, if only to quench that graceless grin of his, and the more readily since he, on his part, seeing her reduced to temporary incompetence, chose to treat her with the most exemplary and exasperating magnanimity.

Hat in hand, the other proffered in sublime effrontery, smiling his winningest smile, Bel strode blithely into the forbidden ground of the camera lines; while his gay salutation fell upon ears incredulous.

"How d'you do, Miss Lee. Don't say you've forgotten me so soon! Druce, you know, Bellamy Druce——"

"Don't be ridiculous, Bel!"

"Can't blame me for wondering—can you?—the way you stare, as if I were a ghost."

"So you are," Lucinda retorted, shocked into gasping coherence by this impudence. "I can't imagine a greater surprise . . . "

"I believe you. But think of mine—I mean, of course, my astonishment."

Bel would have her hand, there was no refusing him that open sign of friendship; for an instant Lucinda let it rest limply in his grasp, appreciating there was nothing she could do now but take his cues as they fell, and treat the rencontre as one of the most welcome she had ever experienced . . .

"But wherever did you bob up from, Bel?"

"From the East, naturally—last night's train. The Alexandria told me where you'd moved, the Hollywood directed me to your studio, somebody there said you might

be found out here—'working on location,' think he called it. So took a chance—and here I am. Hope you don't mind . . . "

"Mind? Why should I?"

"Couldn't be sure I wasn't violating Hollywood etiquette. Never saw a movie in the making before, you know. Most entertaining. Congratulate you and Mr. Summerlad on the way you played your little scene just now. Only for the camera over there, I'd have sworn you both meant it."

"Don't put too much trust in the camera, Mr. Druce," Summerlad interposed blandly. "Rumour to the contrary notwithstanding, the blame' thing has been known to lie."

"H'are you, Mr. Summerlad?" Bellamy met his impudence with irresistible audacity. "So we meet again. Sure we would some day. Well: pleasanter circumstances than last time, what?"

"Conditions are what one makes them, out here in California. I hope you'll find the climate healthier than Chicago's."

"Trust me for that," Bellamy retorted in entire good-humour. "But, I say"—he glanced in feigned apprehension toward the camera—"not obstructing traffic, am I?"

"No fear, or Jacques would 've bawled you out long ago."

" 'Sright," Jacques averred, coming forward to be introduced. "All through for today, folks," he called back. "Le's go!"

Breaking into small knots and straggling off to the waiting motor-cars, the company prepared for its journey home, while cameras and properties were packed up and the horses herded away toward their overnight quarters in Azusa.

Slender, fair, insouciant, looking a precocious little girl in her extravagantly brief skirts, but with all the wis-

dom of Eve a-glimmer in her wide eyes, Fanny sauntered up and permitted Bellamy to be presented.

"My chaperon," Lucinda explained with the false vivacity of overtaut nerves— "the straight-laced conservator of les convenances."

"I hope very truly," Bel asserted, bowing over Fanny's hand—"you never need one less charming or more complaisant."

Fanny giggled, enjoying the contretemps hugely and determined it shouldn't lose savour for want of ambiguous seasoning.

"As for complaisance, the camera covers a multitude of indiscretions. That aside"—her glance coupled Lucinda and Summerlad in delicately malicious innuendo— "taking one consideration with another, a chaperon's lot is not a vapid one."

"I'm sure of that," Bellamy agreed with a straight face. "Not only that, but if you've any time at all to spare for your job, Mrs. Lontaine, the percentage of impaired eyesight among native sons must be high."

"Appreciation *is* such a beautiful thing!" Fanny purred. "Dear man! I do hope you'll be lingering in our midst a long, long time."

"No such luck for me. A few days at most. I only ran out to go over some matters with my man of business out here."

"The square-headed body with the blue gimlet eyes?" Fanny enquired, openly appraising the person who had accompanied Bellamy to this meeting, but who remained in the car with stony gaze riveted on nothing in particular— "who looks like a private detective in a five-reel rehash of the eternal triangle?"

"The same."

"You have so many interests in California, you need a man on the spot to look after them?"

"Not many but, such as they are, of prime importance to me," Bellamy corrected with meaning.

"How romantic!" Fanny sighed. with a look so provocative that Bellamy's mouth twitched involuntarily and he hoped fervently that Lucinda wasn't looking.

He needn't have worried. Lucinda was too thoroughly occupied with her own reactions to the several more agitating aspects of this predicament to have any thoughts to spare for frivolous by-issues.

Not only that, but in pace with the growth of her interest in Summerlad, the sense of detachment from all actual relationship to Bellamy had come to be so absolute it could never have occurred to her to be anything but entertained by the notion of a reciprocal interest springing up between Fanny Lontaine and her husband. Fanny knew her way about, in the by-ways of flirtation was as sure of foot as any chamois on its native crags. As for Bellamy, in Lucinda's sight he was no longer property of hers, he was free to follow the list of his whim, free as the wind, as free as herself . . .

But the bare conception of anything of the sort was far from her mind just then, too many graver considerations were making imperative demands. To begin with, she was at one and the same time grateful to Bellamy for being so decent about her assumed identity and in a raging temper with him for having dared to follow her across the Continent, in sequel to the even more intolerable insolence of setting detectives to spy upon her. No more than in Fanny's mind was there question in Lucinda's as to the real calling of that "man of business" whom Bellamy had left in his car. But she earnestly wanted to know how long and how closely that one had been her shadow, and what he had reported concerning the interests professional and social which had been engaging her.

More than this, Lucinda was at a loss to think how to deal with Bel, now he was here. Patently on his good behaviour, taking care of himself, not drinking too much; more like the man she had married for love so long ago; showing so vast an improvement over the Bellamy of later

years that his unpretending presence alone somehow was enough to diminish the stature of every man present and place even Summerlad on the defensive—Lynn Summerlad, the crowned exquisite of the screen!—obviously the Bel of today was not to be reckoned with as readily as one had reckoned with the drink-stupid, conscience-racked Bel of yesterday.

Disturbed by the sound of a voice addressing her in a tone pitched to pass unheard by Bellamy, she lifted perplexed eyes to Summerlad's face.

"You're dining with me tonight. Don't forget."

"I don't know . . . " Lucinda doubted. "Ought I?"

"Why on earth not? Surely you wont let *him* influence you?"

"I don't know what's best. It might be better to see him tonight and get it over with."

"Don't be foolish. Besides, I'm telling you, not asking you. I'll call for you as soon as I can get home, change, and run back to the Hollywood."

She liked and resented this dictation, and showed both emotions in a semi-petulant smile which she intended as a preface to a retort that was never uttered. For Bellamy interrupted, and immediately she was glad of Summerlad's insistence and forgave him.

"Anxious to see you, Linda, of course, and have a talk, some time when you're not professionally engaged. Tonight be agreeable?"

"Sorry, Bel, but I'm booked for tonight."

"Tomorrow, then?"

"But tomorrow night Cindy has a date with us," Fanny objected.

"I'm out of luck. Never mind: I know Linda won't keep me in suspense forever."

"No: you may call on me the next night, Bel."

"That will be Friday. At the Hollywood, of course? Many thanks. And now I mustn't keep you, it's a long

ride back and you must be quite tired out with your long day's work, the emotional strain and everything."

Bellamy was punctiliously gallant about helping Lucinda and Fanny into their car, then returned to his own, wagging a cavalier farewell to Summerlad as the latter sped away with Jacques in the orange-and-black juggernaut.

When they had been some time under way Fanny broke in upon Lucinda's meditations with an ecstatic murmur: "Priceless!"

Lucinda came to with a frown. "I'm glad you think so," she said shortly.

"Don't be upstage. You know it's priceless. Why didn't you tell me your Bel was such a lamb?"

"He's not my Bel any more, and I don't consider him a lamb."

"Then I presume you've no objection to my vamping him?"

"None whatever, if it amuses you, dear. But why waste your powder on such small game? Any pretty piece can vamp Bel. I'm not sure she need even be pretty."

"Only for your sake, darling. I don't fancy the brute, thanks."

"For my sake?"

"Don't you see through his little game? He's out here to persuade you he's a changed man, a reformed character, and beg you to take him back on probation."

"Then he's far stupider than I imagined."

"Whereas if he falls for my girlish wiles, I'll have shown him up in all his deceitfulness."

"Don't put yourself out on my account." Lucinda curled a lip. "I wouldn't take Bel back no matter how absolute his reformation."

Fanny wanted to ask more questions but, heeding the counsel of discretion, contented herself with a little private sigh. Going on her tone, Lucinda quite meant what she had just said. Good news for Harry, whose plans

would be seriously embarrassed if there were any real reason to fear the defection of Lucinda through reconciliation with her husband. For of course, if she took Druce on again, it would mean an end to the still young history of Linda Lee: Druce never would consent to let his wife continue in the picture business.

"All the same, if you don't mind, I think I'll practise on Bellamy."

"Oh, I don't mind. But Harry might."

"Oh, Harry!" Fanny had a laugh of light scorn. "For all Harry cares——!"

But Lucinda was inattentive; she had lapsed swiftly into an abstraction which had little or nothing to do with the unseasonable reappearance of Bellamy or the prospect of a wearing time with him before he could be finally discouraged. Whatever proposals Bel might wish to make, the answer to them all stood immutably decreed by Lucinda's heart.

It was not with matters of such certainty that she was concerned, but with the problematical issue of the Summerlad affair, an issue whose imminence was to be measured now by hours. Nothing that had happened since had served to erase the impression of that first kiss, nothing conceivable could seem half so momentous. The presence of the camera had meant nothing, they had kissed in earnest; mute, her lips had confessed too much. It remained only to be determined whether or not Summerlad had understood their message. If he had, Lucinda well knew, she was a lost woman.

She was possessed with a species of rapturous alarm . . .

XXVIII

IN sequel Lucinda knew two days made up of emotions singularly stratified. This notwithstanding the fact (of which she needed to remind herself with provoking frequency) that she had put Bel out of her life for good and all, he was less than nothing to her now and, in the simple nature of things, seeing she was pledged to another, never could be more—more, at least, than the trial his pertinacity was rendering him at present.

Most of the time, of course, all of it spent with Lynn or in dreaming of him, she was merely but comprehensibly a young woman in love and glad of it; pleased with herself, pleased with her lover, delighting in the sweet secrecy with which it were seemly for the while to screen their love.

Nevertheless, dark hours alternated in apprehension of what she was resolved must be her final talk with Bel. But how successful dared she hope to be in the business of making Bel agree even to that? Lucinda found it by no means easy to compose an attitude which she could depend upon to dishearten Bel decisively, without going to the length of telling him point-blank that she was in love with another man and meant to marry him as soon as her professional commitments would leave her free to go through the mill of Reno. And to know Bellamy as she did was to have a good warrant for mistrusting lest, far from reeling down to defeat under the impact of that revelation, he might be moved merely to make fun of it. It would be just like Bel to refuse to believe that Lucinda Druce née Harrington meant to marry a movie actor.

"Go ahead, Linda, by all means divorce me if your

heart's set on it"—one could almost hear him say it—"but don't tell me you're doing it just to marry a man who paints his nose for a living."

Somehow one got scant comfort of the retort obvious, that if Lynn did paint his nose he at least did it with nothing more harmful than paint.

At all costs, then, she must avoid the risk of telling Bel what she intended, and keep the tone of the impending scene in tune with the dignity which she had thus far been successful in maintaining, be firm but cool, and give him clearly to understand it was hopeless his attempting to make whole again that sacred vessel which his impious hands had shattered.

Maintained upon such a plane that scene must have been both beautiful and conclusive. And no doubt it would have been so but for one circumstance: Bel not only failed to call on Lucinda at the time appointed but failed even to send word of apology or explanation. An affront whose realization transmuted nobility of spirit into resentment most humanly rancorous.

Lucinda had sacrificed the evening to sense of duty; a true sacrifice, for Lynn was leaving early next morning to spend a fortnight with his company in an Oregon logging camp. So this would have been their last evening together for fourteen livelong days, if Lucinda hadn't promised it to Bellamy, and if Summerlad hadn't mournfully agreed (measurably to Lucinda's disappointment in him) that she could not afford to dishonour her promise. Surely their secret happiness was enough to compensate for that much self-denial, especially when it meant the last of Bellamy . . .

Losing patience after hours of waiting, Lucinda called the Alexandria on the telephone, and was informed that Mr. Druce had "checked out" early in the morning, saying nothing of an intention to return.

Mystified even more than angry, Lucinda went to bed, but lay wakeful a long time trying to fathom the enigma

of such conduct in one whose need of her had brought him all the way across America to beg that very audience which had been granted only to be coolly ignored. The readiest explanation, likewise at first blush the likeliest, was none the less at odds with the premeditation to be read in Bel's leaving his hotel before noon, which wasn't the action of a man whom drink had made forgetful, but rather that of one who repented his haste in suing for something which sober second-thought had satisfied him he didn't really want.

How funny, if so! How very human!

Lucinda contributed her first smile since nightfall to the darkness of her bedchamber.

But having smiled, she frowned involuntarily . . .

No note came from Bellamy the next morning, and nothing transpired in the course of the next several weeks to afford any clue to the riddle; with the upshot that Lucinda thought about her husband a great deal more than she wanted to or had at any time since leaving Chicago. Curiosity being piqued no less than vanity, though she kept assuring herself it was a matter of indifference to her what Bel did or didn't nowadays, invariably the consideration followed that, all the same, it was strange, it wasn't like Bel to treat any woman so rudely.

She would, in those days, have been glad and grateful for some interest so absorbing as to relegate this vexing question to the realm of the immaterial, where rightly it belonged. But, with Summerlad away, nothing much happened with enervating regularity, the most interesting hours Lucinda knew were those spent in her rooms waiting for Lynn to call up on the long distance telephone. This he did every evening, and though she was thus daily provided with exhilarating moments, those that followed always seemed desperately the duller. The truth was, lacking the sense of danger, of flirting with fire, that was intrinsic in their love-making, lacking the sense of doing something that she oughtn't, calmly flouting the rigid

code of her caste and having nothing to pay, Lucinda was beginning to find her environment a trifle tiresome. Say what one would, there was a certain cloying sameness about it all.

Somebody once said in her hearing that there wasn't any weather in Southern California but only climate. And it was true that at times the wonder and beauty of everlasting sunlight seemed a poor offset to its monotony; so that Lucinda would sometimes find herself grown a little weary of the sky's dense, inexpressive, day-long blue; and even its nightly extravagance of stars now and again impressed her as being too persistently spectacular, an ostentation on the part of Nature as tasteless as many jewels plastered on a woman's pretty bosom. One rather wanted to recommend the chiffon of clouds . . .

Then, too, one grew acquainted with certain, definite limitations restricting the amount of amusement to be had of taking active or passive part in the simple, rowdy pleasures of the motion-picture peerage. When one had several times attended the festivities these staged in the public resorts most in favour or in their private homes, one was apt to feel moderately surfeited with jazz of all sorts, mental and moral as well as musical, and a society made up in the main of men who thought it too much trouble to dress and women who as a matter of habit airily consummated the contradiction of being at one and the same time under and over-dressed. And once the novelty of learning to speak a strange tongue had worn off, no great amount of intellectual nourishment was to be extracted of studio shop-talk, which commonly was concerned in the ratio of one to ten with the business of making motion-pictures and with the private, broadly speaking, lives of the people who were making them, lives seldom held worth the discussing when their conduct was decorous.

Though personal liberty of action and freedom of speech be part of the inalienable heritage of the American people,

it was the sum of Lucinda's observation that in the studios both were practised to the point of abandon. She considered herself the most liberal-minded of women, the life she had led till now had left her few illusions, she had even been known to enunciate an aphorism in the sense that hypocrisy is a lubricant essential to the mechanism of society: here, however, she remarked, such lubrication was so generally dispensed with that oftentimes the bearings screeched to Heaven.

But Heaven made no sign, and the Hollywood of active and retired tradespeople, to which the studios had brought prosperity beyond its maddest dreams, stuffed its ears and made believe there was nothing to hear.

As for the studios, busy, complacent, and well-content to be spared the troublesome necessity of pretending to be better than they were, they forgot (if, indeed, they ever stopped to think) that they did not constitute the whole of the community, and chuckled openly over a saying that ran their rounds that season, the mot of one of their own wits:

"Are you married? Or do you live in Hollywood?"

XXIX

LUCINDA had by now become sufficiently conversant with the ways of directors to hear without much surprise—if with a little sinking of her lonely heart—the news which Summerlad had to communicate on the tenth day of his absence, when he telephoned that Jacques was threatening to find a fortnight too little for the work that had taken the company away from Los Angeles.

And the next day, when she paid the studio the perfunctory call of routine—to learn, as usual, that Barry Nolan had as yet sent no word concerning the date when he expected to begin directing for Linda Lee Inc.—Lucinda saw, as she left her car in front of the administration building, the owner of the premises lounging against one of the fluted columns of the portico and mumbling an unlighted cigar, and got from him a moody nod instead of the beaming salutation he had taught her to expect.

Himself a monstrously homely man, short, stout and swart, Zinn had an alert eye for feminine good looks, which had never before neglected to give Lucinda to understand that it was on her and humid with approbation.

By birth a Russian Jew, offspring of immigrants from Odessa, Isadore Zinn had worked his way into the producing business, as the saying ran, through its backdoor; that is to say, from the exhibitors' side. Indefatigable industry and appetite for hardship coupled with quenchless greed and a complete absence of scruples and moral sense, had promoted him from the office of usher in a "nickelodeon" of the cinema's early days successively to

be the proprietor of the enterprise, organizer of a chain of motion-picture theatres, and president of a league of exhibitors, which last had eventually pooled its resources and gone into the business of producing as well as that of showing pictures. The money of this league had built what were today the Zinn Studios; just how this property had come to pass into Zinn's sole possession was a matter of secret history concerning which there were many rumours, all unsavory. Zinn was reputed by his loving employees to set no more store by a dollar than by an eyetooth or an only child.

On leaving, half an hour later, Lucinda found the man in the same spot and pose. Apparently he had not moved a muscle in that interval. She paused to ask why, and was frankly told.

"I'm figuring on killing a director, Miss Lee, and wondering if maybe I couldn't get away with it. I could all right, if you only could believe all you hear. You ask any of them fellers in there"—Zinn jerked his head toward the building behind him—"takes my good money and calls me Mister Zinn—and they'll tell you I get away with murder every day or worse." He sighed dismally. "If they was any truth in that, I'd be a happy kike and a lot of directors' wives wouldn't have nothing on their minds no more, only their hair. The way I am today, the first one I'd take a load off her intellect would be Mrs. Jacques."

"I didn't know Mr. Jacques was married."

"Maybe he ain't right now, it's hard to tell. You take actors and directors, they're all the same, you never know when they ain't married or how long they been that way. The way it seems to me, they get married off and on just to see what difference it will make if any. 'Most everybody you know's got a loose wife or husband kicking around somewhere this side the Cajon Pass. The only way you can keep track of them is don't try."

"It must be frightfully embarrassing at times . . . "

"Ah, they don't mind! I had one little feller working

for me, playing leads in two-reel comedies, his director was his first wife's second husband, and the little lady played opposite him was his second wife once removed. They got along fine s'long's they was on the lot, but outside the studio they wouldn't speak, only bark when they passed."

"But you haven't told me what Mr. Jacques has been doing . . . "

"Oh, him—! I got a wire from him just now, says he's going to have to keep the Summerlad outfit up in that logging camp maybe another couple weeks. Joe could of shot all the scenes he had to shoot up there in a week if he'd of went at it the right way; so I give him two weeks, and now he wants four. And I don't dare give him the razz for fear he'll make it six weeks or quit."

"But if you aren't satisfied, surely you can find another director."

"Sure I can. And the first thing *he'll* do is run all the rushes in the projection-room and tell me they're rotten and got to be retook the way he sees it. And then he'll rewrite the continuity and, just to show me what a low piker Jacques was, he'll stick in a lot of new stuff that'll cost maybe another hundred thousand dollars."

"I don't understand," Lucinda objected. "Why should Mr. Jacques deliberately waste time on a production?"

"He's getting his two thousand a week, ain't he? And if he makes this picture cost less than the last one Summerlad done, how's he going to keep his tail up with the other dogs, next time the hooch hounds meets down to Santa Monica? Not only that, if he should ever get a rep for making pictures quick and cheap, the only jobs he'll be offered will mean honest-to-God work."

"But, Mr. Zinn: if that's the usual director's attitude toward his job, I should think you would do as we're doing with Mr. Nolan, pay each a fixed sum for every production he makes."

Zinn drew down the corners of his mouth in sour pity for Lucinda's innocence. "Twenty-five thousand a picture's what Nolan's going to drag down, ain't it? When a director gets that class, he's doing you a favour to make pictures for you, to start off with; and then he spreads himself to spend more coin more ways than any other director ever thought of, just to show you he's the big-money boy. A director don't think big means anything without a dollar-mark parked in front of it; and the producer's the poor sap that puts up the dollar-mark every time. They's only one way a producer can beat a director, the way it is today, and that's quit the fillum business cold."

"I presume that's what you'll do, if the directors persist in making it impossible for you to make any money."

A twinkle kindled in the beady eyes, a rougishly confidential grin formed on the fleshy features. "Now, listen, Miss Lee: I never told you I wasn't making money, did I? It's the jack directors waste on me I'm kicking about. Any time things get so bad you can't give one of them megaphone nurses his head and still get your production cost back and something over, I got it all framed so I can ease out and never be missed."

And when Lucinda had obliged by voicing a polite doubt that such a thing as this could ever come to pass, Zinn concluded with grim humour: "I got everything all set to sell the studio to the county for an insane asylum; then nobody in Hollywood won't never know the difference."

Running true to the form thus forecast, Jacques kept the Summerlad company away so long that its return found the first Linda Lee production in full swing, with Barry Nolan in command, Lucinda playing the supple puppet of his whim from sun to sun, Fanny demurely walking through the feminine part of second importance, and Lontaine functioning at the peak of his capacity as

executive genius of the organization and showing the strain of it all in his prominent blue eyes.

Why it should be so hard on him nobody seemed to know and Lontaine was too busy to explain; while Lucinda, in the prepossession of her anxiety to give a good account of herself before the camera, carelessly accepted that prodigious display of activity, that mien of unremitting abstraction, as phenomena doubtless common to men of affairs, and never paused to wonder why Lontaine need be so fretted and fretful when everything was now in the hands of Nolan and his assistants, who did pretty much as they pleased anyway, as a rule consulting Lontaine if at all only after acting on their own initiative and leaving to his office merely the routine of financial matters.

Nevertheless Lontaine was ever the first of the Linda Lee forces to show up at the studio in the morning, the last to leave it at night, and between whiles kept incessantly on the go: trotting from his desk to the stage to give Nolan the benefit of advice which was invariably attended to with much patience and disregarded with more promptitude as soon as its source turned his back; to the laboratory to run a wise eye over negative newly developed as it came dripping from the vats to be stretched to dry upon huge revolving drums; to the studio of the technical director, to badger that competent and long-suffering gentleman about sets and their dressing; to Zinn's sanctum overlooking the "lot," where that old-timer sat spying out on the comings and goings of his employees and spinning his endless schemes of avarice, but ever ready to lend an ear and give cunning counsel to a tenant who paid his rent on the nail; to the projection-rooms to view the rushes; back to the stage to flatter Lucinda, felicitate Nolan, and buttonhole subordinate players for earnest conferences apart concerning their performances—this last a habit which, since it afforded the actors a chance to talk about themselves, earned Lontaine the loving gratitude of all hands, barring the directorial staff whose job it

was to undo all that he did, were it well done or ill, for the sake of morale and to preserve unimpaired the precious prestige of Barry Nolan.

At other times members of the cast loafing about the lot while they waited to be called to work on the stage, would observe the president of Linda Lee Inc., at the window of his tiny office in the administration building, brooding portentously over documents of legal aspect, or with fine flourishes of the fountain-pen affixing his hand to those cheques which, issuing forth in a steady stream, kept the treasury always at low ebb no matter how often or how generously Lucinda might replenish it.

Neither did the silver-and-blue car know overmuch rest. In view of the man's ubiquity in the studio, it was surprising how often Lontaine was to be seen speeding down Sunset Boulevard, bound for the business centre of Los Angeles, to other studios for mysterious conferences with local somebodies who had no known interest in the destinies of Linda Lee Inc., or to objectives whose nature remained a close secret between Lontaine, his chauffeur, and his God.

To all these picturesque symptoms of hustle and bounce, so little in character with the Briton of tradition, his wife played silent but attentive audience; though oftentimes her pretty eyes would light up with an unspoken comment too pungent to be wasted and, discreetly questing a sympathetic confidant would find it without fail in Barry Nolan, who learned to watch for that look whenever one of Lontaine's antics made a more than everyday appeal to his sense of humour.

Irish both by descent and profession, Nolan had at least that sense conspicuously developed. What others he possessed of which as much might be asserted, was a question which came to occupy many of Lucinda's spare moments. She was not at all disposed to be hypercritical, in the beginning, she had yet to cultivate conceit in her abilities as an actress, she knew that she knew little more

than nothing about the manufacture of motion-pictures; and Summerlad had so highly recommended Nolan she inclined to suspect there must be something radically wrong with her judgment. With all this, she couldn't pretend to account for Nolan's high place in the hierarchy of the cinema, unless a sprightly and affectionate disposition, a fetching grin, infectious verve, impudence without end, and a distinctly indicated vein of genius at crap-shooting, summed up the essential qualifications of a director who pretended to earn a wage of twenty-five thousand dollars per production. Certainly nothing that Nolan was contributing to this present picture, in the way of action, business, sense of dramatic proportion and feeling for pictorial values, appealed as in any way inspired—except occasionally by a retentive memory.

True that common usage in methods of production, working together with such special circumstances as Lucinda's inexperience and the absence of any fixed plan of plot development other than in the omniscience of Barry Nolan, made it anything but easy to judge the man fairly by the record of his work from day to day.

In the continuity which Nolan concocted to supplant that prepared by Zinn's staff writer—as in every proper continuity—each scene had been placed in its right sequence, where anybody uninstructed in the way of a director with a picture might reasonably look to see it appear in the completed photoplay. But as soon as the typist had transcribed Nolan's dictation, the new continuity was turned over to his assistants to be dismembered and rebuilt with its scenes arranged as they were to be photographed, by groups, without respect to chronological sequence.

Obviously it would be stupid (as Lucinda was quick to appreciate) to take the scenes as laid out in the continuity; for example, to photograph Scene 1 in a studio set, transport the company ten miles to photograph Scene 2 on, say, an ocean beach, and jump back to the studio to take Scene 3 on the same set as used for Scene 1. Consequently all

scenes indicated for each particular set were shot seriatim; after which the set would be promptly demolished, to clear the stage for the erection of another.

It resulted from this that only an intelligence comprehending the whole plan and scope of both story and continuity could have kept track of the scenes as photographed and rated each rightly at its proportional value. Even in the ranks of studio veterans, minds of such force and grasp are few and far to seek. The Linda Lee company hadn't been at work two days before Lucinda began to feel in relation to the story like one lost in a fog, helplessly dependent upon the guiding hand of Barry Nolan, and none too well satisfied that he knew his way about as well as he pretended to in that beclouded labyrinth.

Neither was confidence in his infallibility encouraged by a habit to which he, like most directors, proved lamentably prone, of improvising improvements on the story as he went along. All of a sudden, while directing a scene, Nolan was wont to break out in a profuse inspiration, and incontinently some well-remembered bit of business or episode from an old stage success would be interjected into or substituted for incidents really germane to the original plot. That this practice as often as not produced results in conflict with the fundamental mechanics of the story, if it missed throwing them out of kilter entirely, seemed to be a consideration of minor consequence.

Thus Nolan laboured long and passionately to persuade Lucinda it would benefit the story to engraft on it a scene wherein she would figure as a lonely prisoner in a garret, menaced by hordes of hungry rats. This regardless of the fact that there was no garret in the original story, nor any room for one, and no reason why the young person portrayed by Lucinda should be imprisoned in one, but solely because Nolan happened to fancy a resemblance between her and an actress whom he had several years before directed with great success in a garret scene with rats ad lib.

That the rats didn't work their way into the picture eventually, whether Lucinda wanted them or not, was mainly due to Nolan's misfortune in failing to think of them before his star began to show symptoms of what he called the swelled-head; that is to say before, having worked several weeks under his direction, Lucinda began to suspect that Nolan wasn't really sole custodian of the sacred mystery of motion-picture making, and to assert herself modestly as one whose views ought to have some weight with a director whose pay came out of her own pocket.

Nor is she to this day ready to believe that Nolan, left to himself, would not ultimately have overborne all opposition and had his willful way with the rat episode.

But it was neither because of this instance, nor because of other arbitrary changes that Nolan made in the story, that Lucinda first learned to mistrust his ability, but because of the appalling ignorance which he betrayed concerning what she believed should be matters of general knowledge, such as rudimentary principles of social usage.

Since the story they were concerned with had to do with people of fashionable New York transacting the business of life in their homes and public rendezvous, Lucinda thought it important that their manners should conform to approved convention; but Nolan was so little learned in such matters, and his impatience with them was so wholehearted, that she presently abandoned all effort to correct him, and in a fatalistic spirit endeavoured to comfort her misgivings with his customary rejoinder to advice in any form: "Ah, what's it matter? Ninety per cent. of your audiences are solid bone from the neck up, and the rest wouldn't think they'd got their money's worth unless they found something to beef about in a picture. Why worry about little things like that? Life's too short, and we're wasting time!"

So Lucinda schooled herself to suffer in silence when

she saw men of alleged gentle breeding offer women their left arms to escort them from the drawing to the dining rooms of Fifth avenue or when two bickered in public as to which should escort to her home a woman married to a third, and when Nolan posed a pair of lawless lovers in the foyer of a restaurant and instructed them to register unutterable emotion by holding hands, in the view of hundreds, and swelling their tormented bosoms until (as Fanny described it) they resembled more than anything else a brace of pouter pigeons shaking the shimmy.

She held her peace even when Nolan directed a father and his son, both presumptive adepts in the social life of New York, to pause on meeting, when each was decently turned out in morning-coat and top hat, strike attitudes of awed admiration, solemnly wheel each other round by the shoulders and, wagging dumbfoundered heads over the sight of so much sartorial splendour, exclaim—in subtitles to be inserted in the film—"Some boy!" "Some Dad!"

And when a woman in a scene with Lucinda parted from her, uttering an injunction put in her mouth by Nolan, "Don't forget, dearie—tea at the Ritz at one o'clock," Lucinda, conceiving this to be a slip of the tongue, said nothing. But when later she viewed in the projection-room that sequence of scenes roughly assembled, with what are termed "scratch titles," in place, and read the words as quoted, and on making enquiry learned that they had been copied verbatim from Mr. Nolan's continuity, she ventured to remonstrate.

"But, Mr. Nolan, tea is a function for four o'clock or later all the world over."

"That's so, Miss Lee? Well, what d'you know about that? Guess I must've been thinking about luncheon."

"But your subtitle introducing the restaurant sequence later on says 'Tea at the Ritz.'"

"That's right. I remember now, I meant tea, not luncheon. It's that way in the book."

"But in the restaurant scenes the tables are covered with cloths and the waiters are serving all sorts of dishes, course meals."

"What's the matter with that?"

"Why, nothing is served for tea but tea itself and toast and perhaps little pastries."

Nolan grinned sheepishly and scratched his head. "I guess we're a terrible lot of roughnecks out here on the Coast, Miss Lee—not onto fine points like that. But it's all right: we'll change the subtitles to read luncheon instead of tea."

"But you've just shown me lunching at another restaurant. It isn't reasonable to make me eat two luncheons in one day."

"That's easy. We'll make the subtitle read: 'Luncheon at the Ritz the next day.'"

"I hate to keep on objecting, Mr. Nolan, but the situation depends on these people meeting at tea the very day they lunched together."

"Well, if we can't fix it with a subtitle, we'll have to change the situation, then. We can't go back and shoot those scenes all over again, it'd cost too darn much; and anyway we haven't got time."

Having kept the Linda Lee organization awaiting his convenience for five weeks after the date upon which he had agreed to begin directing for it, Nolan was now with the utmost sang-froid trying to jam through in one month an undertaking for which he would, going his normal gait, require all of two; partly because he was being paid by the job instead of by the week, in part because his services for the next picture had not been bespoken and he was flirting with a bid from the East, an offer contingent upon his being able to leave Los Angeles not later than a set date, finally and not in the least part for another reason altogether, a peculiarly private one.

He wasn't happy in his present circumstances, his van-

ity was deeply wounded, and the wound was not likely to heal so long as he must continue in the humiliating position to which he had been reduced by Lucinda's insusceptibility to his charms of person. Nolan had all along looked forward to this engagement with considerable animation, because Lucinda was a type new to him and he counted on learning about women from her, too. The trouble was, he hadn't in the least suspected that she was to prove not only new but unique in his experience. He knew what it was to be resisted, and didn't mind that so much, finding it at worst flattering. Once or twice since becoming a director he had even met with the appearance of indifference, and had had the fun of showing it up for what it really was. But this was the first time in many years that any woman with whom he had been brought into professional contact had proved not so much indifferent to him as unconscious that he boasted any attractions calling for even such negative emotion. Nolan needed some time to appreciate that this unprecedented and outrageous thing could really be, and when he did he was hurt to his soul's marrow. By nature buoyant, he found himself growing morose; by reputation the best-tempered of directors, he heard himself snapping at his subordinates like the veriest martinet of them all. Worse yet, Lucinda seemed not even to reckon him a genius at his calling. An unheard-of state of affairs and one intolerable to a man of his kidney. He wanted more than he had ever wanted anything to be quit of her for good and all and at the earliest possible moment.

For the indignities which he felt had thus been put upon him in a fashion wholly uncalled-for there was, of course, reparation proffered in Fanny Lontaine's indisputable awareness of him. And even as Lucinda, Fanny too was clearly "class." On the other hand, she had a husband, undeniably an ass, puffed up out of all reason with self-importance, but still and for all that a husband. Besides, having set his heart on a star, Nolan conceived it to be

inconsistent with his dignity to content himself with a satellite. So he sulked and could not be comforted.

Necessarily the picture suffered through the languishing of his interest; and Nolan, foreseeing the professional and public verdict, did his best to forestall it by privately letting it be known he'd been a dumb-bell to tackle the job of making an actress out of a rank amateur, only for the jack involved he would never have tried it. And then the story they'd asked him to do—! One of these society things, you know: no punch, no speed, no drama, nothing but five reels of stalling, clothes and close-ups, padding for a lot of lines; a regular illustrated dialogue. What could you do with a story like that, anyway?

More openly, in the course of time, as he grew acutely self-conscious of inability to cope with what he chose to deny, the dramatic possibilities intrinsic in the story of a father who falls in love with the woman loved by his own son, a woman whom he has sworn to expose as unworthy to be his son's wife, Nolan spoke of the production in the studio as "this piece of cheese."

His name ranked high on the roster of America's foremost photoplay directors. Whenever one of the Los Angeles cinema houses booked a picture of his making the bill-boards of the town heralded in twenty-four sheet posters the coming of "A Barry Nolan Production"; frequently the lettering of this line over-shadowed that in which the name of the star was displayed, invariably it dwarfed the name of the story.

After witnessing several of these offerings, Lucinda began to wonder why . . .

XXX

BUT that distrust of Barry Nolan's competency which troubled Lucinda's mind almost from the very outset of their association had yet to crystallize on the Saturday when Summerlad was expected home; and her disposition toward the director was rendered only the more amiable when, toward noon, he informed her that he wouldn't need her again till Monday morning.

Nevertheless it threatened to prove a long afternoon to an impatient woman, and Lucinda, wanting company to help her while it away, promptly petitioned for Fanny's release as well.

Fanny, however, was busily employed, as she had been ever since early morning, waiting for Nolan to put her through a scheduled five-minute scene which would round out her full day's work. But Nolan graciously promised to set her free in another hour, and then—to get rid of Lucinda's presence, which instinct was already beginning to warn him was silently skeptical of his claims—artfully suggested that she might like to review the rushes of yesterday's camera-work.

Assuming that she would find the projection-room empty, Lucinda made her way to it without bothering to remove her make-up, but on opening the door saw a fan-like beam of turbid light wavering athwart its darkness, and would have withdrawn, had not Zinn's thick and genial accents hailed her from the rear of the long, black-walled, tunnel-like chamber.

"Come right on in, Miss Lee. We'll be through in a minute. Just running some of the fillum come through from Joe Jacques yesterday. Maybe you'd like to see it.

'Sgreat stuff that boy Summerlad's putting over this time."

Murmuring thanks, Lucinda groped her way—bending low, that her head might not block the light—to one of the arm-chairs beneath the slotted wall which shut off the projection-machines in their fire-proof housing.

When her vision had accommodated itself to the gloom, she made out several figures in other chairs, sitting quietly behind ruddy noses of cigars and cigarettes. At a table to one side the glow of a closely shaded lamp disclosed an apparently amputated hand hanging with pencil poised above a pad, ready to note down anything the traffic of the screen might suggest to Zinn. The latter was conversing in undertones with somebody in the adjoining chair, and the rumble of their voices was punctuated now and again by a chuckle which affected Lucinda with a shiver of uncertain recollection. But she couldn't be sure, in that mirk she could by no means make out the features of Zinn's companion or even the shape of his head, and the surmise seemed too absurd . . .

She was none the less perturbed to a degree that hindered just appreciation of the admirable work of Lynn Summerlad, whose shadow, clad in the rude garments of a lumberjack, was performing feats of skill and daring against a background of logging-camp scenery; and thanks to her misgivings, as much as to the custom of taking and retaking again and again even scenes of minor importance, had grown well weary of watching Lynn bound frantically from log to log of a churning river to rescue Alice Drake from what seemed to be desperately real danger in the break-up of a log jam, when abruptly the shining rectangle of the screen turned blank, the beam of clouded light was blotted out, and a dim bulb set in the black ceiling was lighted to guide the spectators to the door.

Then, with a fluttering heart, Lucinda identified her husband in Zinn's companion; and anger welling in her bosom

affected her with momentary suffocation, so that she was put to it to reply when Zinn, leering hideously, presented Bellamy.

"Shake hands with Mr. Druce, Miss Lee: new tenant of mine, going to work here same as you, just signed a lease for space to make his first production."

"What!"

At that monosyllable of dismayed protest, Lucinda saw Zinn's little eyes of a pig grow wide with surprise; which emotion, however, might have been due quite as much to what Bellamy was saying.

"But I am fortunate, Mr. Zinn, in already having the honour of Miss Lee's acquaintance." Bellamy took possession of her hand. "How do you do, Linda? So happy to see you again—looking more radiant than ever, too!"

"Is that so? You two know each other! Whyn't you tell me?"

"Wasn't sure it was this Miss Lee I knew until I saw her."

"Well, well! Ain't that nice! You ought to get along together fine, both working in the same studio and everything."

Lucinda found her voice all at once, but hardly her self-possession. "It isn't—it can't be true! Bel: it isn't true you're——!"

"Afraid it is, Linda." Bel's smile was lightly mocking. "The picture business has got me in its toils at last. Only needed that trip out here to decide me. Now I'm in it up to my ears. Something to do, you know."

"But not—not as an actor?"

"Bless your heart, no! All kinds of a nincompoop but that. No: I'm coming in on the producing side, forming a little company and starting in a modest way, as you see, on leased premises, with the most economical overhead I can figure. If I make good—well, I understand Mr. Zinn is willing to sell his studio, and I'll be wanting one all my very own."

"Any time you want to talk business, Mr. Druce, you know the way to my office. Don't stand on ceremony, and don't let nobody kid you I'm into a conference and can't be disturbed by anybody who wants to buy me out of this Bedlam: just walk right in, slap the cheque-book down on my desk, and unlimber the old fountain-pen; you'll find me willing to listen to reason. Well: got to get along, folks. They're going to run some of Miss Lee's rushes now. Maybe you'd like to look at them, if she don't mind."

"I hope very truly she won't," Bellamy said, smiling into Lucinda's eyes.

Lucinda uttered a faint-hearted negative: no, she wouldn't mind. No other way out till they were alone . . . But her heart was hot with resentment of the way that Bel was forever forcing situations upon her in which she must accept him on his own terms.

Immediately the door had closed behind Zinn, however, Bel's manner changed, his show of assurance gave place to diffidence or its fair semblance.

"I'm sorry, Linda—I really don't mean to be a pest——"

"Then why are you here? Why *won't* you keep out of my way?"

"Give me half a chance, I think I can make you understand——"

"You had that chance weeks ago, and deliberately refused it. Do you imagine I will give you another opportunity to affront me as you did?"

"But surely you got my note——"

"What note?"

"The note I sent to the Hollywood, explaining I was called East on two hours' notice, but would return as soon as I could; begging you to consider our interview merely postponed——"

"If you sent any such note, I could hardly have failed to receive it."

"But Linda! I did send it, an hour before I left, by special delivery—'pon my word I did!"

"Possibly," Lucinda suggested with laboured scorn, "you misaddressed it, forgetting which of your numerous feminine acquaintances you were writing to."

"I addressed it," Bel insisted stoutly, "to Mrs. Bellamy Druce."

"If so, that explains it. They know me at the hotel only as Linda Lee."

"How was I to know that?"

"Your sources of information concerning me seem to be fairly busy and accurate."

"I'm sorry if you've been annoyed"—Lucinda cut in a short laugh of derision—"no, really I am! But I had to——"

"Wait!" Lucinda had become aware of a head framed in the little window of the projection-booth and regarding them with a smile of friendly interest. "Not now—later."

"All ready, Miss Lee," said the operator, unabashed—"if you are, I mean."

"Yes, thank you, quite ready." As she settled back into her chair and Bellamy placed himself by her side she added in a guarded tone: "As soon as I've looked these scenes over, we can go to my dressing-room . . . "

The ceiling light winked out, stuttering rays thrashed through the dark to paint in black and white those winsome gestures which Lucinda had described before the camera. But her interest in her pictured self for once had lapsed, vanity itself was for the time being wholly in abeyance, she watched without seeing the play of light and shadow, and when it faded from the screen could not have said what she had seen.

Weird, to sit there in the dark with the man beside her who had once filled all her heart that was now filled with longing for another . . .

When the screen once more shone blank and the ceiling light flashed on, Bel was smiling cheerfully.

"No wonder you fell for the screen so hard, Linda: you're exquisite, and no mistake. If you stick at it, never fear; it won't be long before you'll be wiping the eyes of the best of them."

"Thank you," she said stiffly—"but I don't think I want that. I only want a life I can live and hold my self-respect."

"And you come to Hollywood to find it?"

She flushed darkly and with an angry movement got up. "Please come."

Her maid was waiting in the dressing-room, but Lucinda sent the woman to explain to Mrs. Lontaine that they might be a few minutes delayed, and told her not to come back till sent for. Alone with Bellamy, she showed him a face on fire with challenge.

"You said you wanted to explain, Bel; you won't get another chance."

He nodded soberly. "Quite realize that. But this once will do, can say all I want to in three minutes. Then you're free to call it quits for good, if you like."

That posed her rudely. Did he mean—could it be possible he meant he had become reconciled to the rift in their relations? Had the arrow she had loosed into the dark, that night when Bel had broken his appointment with her, flown straight to the mark? Was Bel really "cured?" He had that look; there was deference without abasement in his bearing, if regret now and then tinged his tone it conveyed no hint of repining. By every sign he was doing very well without her.

"Can you doubt that's what I'll 'like,' Bel? Or what must I do, more than I've already done, to prove I ask nothing better than to call it quits for good with you?"

"Oh, you've done all that was needed, thanks. I'm convinced—have been for some weeks, if you want to know—

in fact, from the moment when I found out you'd lost your head over a movie actor."

"Indeed?" Lucinda mastered an impulse to bite her lip. "And have you anything to say about that?"

"Not a blessed thing. That's your affair."

"Pity you didn't know in time to spare you the trip."

"I'm not sure, Linda. Knowing you as I did, I don't think I'd have believed anything I didn't see with my own eyes——"

"Anything so greatly to my discredit, of course!"

"Easy, Linda! I didn't say that. You know best what you want—that's something nobody else can ever tell one. I'm not criticizing, I'm merely explaining."

"And very good of you, I'm sure."

But Lucinda had not been able to utter the taunt without a tremor.

Bellamy gave his head a stubborn shake and stepped nearer. "Please don't be angry because of anything stupid I may say. You see, you misunderstand me: I came out here that first time dead-set to win you back at any cost, still madly in love with you, absolutely unable to conceive of a life that didn't pivot on you, Linda. I was prepared to give you any pledges you could possibly ask——"

"Did you flatter yourself any pledge you could give would mean anything to me, when you'd broken your word so often?"

"I hoped I could make you understand what a blow your leaving me had been, how it had brought me to my senses at last, jolted me up on the water-wagon, where I've been ever since—I haven't had a suspicion of a drink, Linda, since that night you ran away—and made me see what an unspeakable rotter I'd been, fooling around with women as I had. That's another thing I cut out like a shot. I haven't looked sideways at another woman since . . ."

"Not even after discovering I'd fallen in love with another man?"

"Not even after that. Somehow casual women don't mean anything to me any more—I mean, casual flirtations. They're too damn stupid—silly waste of time. I guess I had to be squiffy as I used to be most of the time, not to be bored by them. Oh! I'm not saying I shan't ever fall in love again, just as you have; but when I do, it will be the real thing, Linda—not the simple cussedness that makes a child play with a gun because he knows it's loaded."

"This is all very interesting, I'm sure. But after all, it doesn't explain—now, does it?"

"It explains why I followed you out here the first trip, why I had to see you in another man's arms, kissing him, and then hear all the small-town gossip about you two before I'd believe . . . "

"There is gossip, then?"

"What do you think? According to all reports, you've been going it, rather, you and this chap Summerlad—'stepping out together,' as they say in Hollywood."

Lucinda affected a shrug of indifference: Bel musn't guess she cared what people said.

"But I am still waiting to hear why you've come out this time; what it means when you hire quarters here in the studio where I am working daily, and pretend you're going into the producing business. You may be able to make Zinn believe that tale; at least, he won't ask embarrassing questions so long as you put money in his pocket; but you can hardly expect me—!"

"You're wrong there, Linda. I'm just as much in earnest about becoming a producer of good motion-pictures as you are about becoming a star. I got a little look into the game that fascinated me, in those two days while I was killing time, waiting for the night you'd set for our talk. You ought to be able to understand: you were fascinated yourself at first sight."

"But you—! Bellamy Druce dabbling in the motion-picture business!"

"Well, what price Mrs. Bellamy Druce in the same galley?"

"No, Bel: frankly, I don't believe you. You're here with some wild idea you can influence me to do what you wish—whatever that is, since you say you've given up wanting me to come back to you."

"Oh, as to that—absolutely!"

"Then why must you set up your shop here, where we can't help running into each other half a dozen times a day?"

"Because there isn't another inch of stage to be hired in all Los Angeles today. I've had a man looking round for me ever since my first visit, he's tried every place. The only thing I could do to avoid renting from Zinn was to build, and that meant a longer wait than I wanted. Ask anybody who knows the local studio situation, if you doubt what I say."

"So you didn't come out this time with any idea of seeing me at all, Bel?"

"Of course, I did. I had to see you. Things couldn't rest as they were, especially after you'd taken up with this Summerlad. I'm assuming you're serious in that quarter, of course."

"And what has that to do—?"

"Just this: I don't like it. As I say, if you want to run around with a movie actor, that's your affair; but so long as you remain my wife, it's my affair, too. Don't forget it's my name you're trailing through the muck of this sink-hole of scandal."

She flamed at him—*"Bel!"*—but he wouldn't heed.

"You don't suppose you're going to get away with the Linda Lee thing much longer, do you? If all these people don't know it's an assumed name now, they jolly soon will. How do you suppose I found out you were up to this game? No: not through detectives, but simply by calling on your friend, Ben Culp, the man who first put this picture bee in your bonnet. Nelly Guest gave me that cue,

and I thought Culp might know something helpful. Well: he did, when I called he had on his desk a trade paper that carried a report of the incorporation of Linda Lee Inc. Did you imagine anybody would need more than that name, coupled with Lontaine's as president of the company? Culp himself was the first to tumble to it . . . And that's what I'm here to ask you. If you're going through, if you're bent on leading the life you have been leading ever since you fell in with these people, be good enough to keep my wife's name out of it! Get your divorce and get it soon. That's all I have to ask of you."

Lucinda replied with a slow inclination of her head.

"What you want is my dearest wish," she said. "Depend on it, Bel, I shan't waste a day, I'll take the first train I can catch for Reno, after finishing this picture."

"That's simply splendid of you!" Bellamy declared heartily. "Anything I can do to help along, of course—just let me know."

"I'll be glad if you'll go now," Lucinda told him. "I think I've had about all I can stand for one day."

"Then good bye, my dear—a thousand thanks!"

XXXI

LUCINDA told Fanny that, when the dressing-room door had shut Bellamy out, she "didn't know whether to laugh or to cry"; though it's true that the laugh, if any, being admittedly on herself, she was the more moved to weep. And for some minutes she stood in thought, with a curiously uncertain expression, a look that, trembling between a smile and a frown, faithfully reflected a mind that couldn't readily choose between relief and chagrin. In the end throwing herself into a chair, she hid her face in her hands and shook with mirth which she really wasn't able to control, all the while aware that, but for the assurance of Lynn's love to cushion the shock to self-esteem, tears instead must have been her portion.

After all, one couldn't deny that it had been a facer, that complete snub Bel had administered to her expectations with his cool relinquishment of all pretense of claim upon her, barring that which was his beyond dispute, his right to demand the speediest feasible dissolution of their bonds.

"And you really think divorce is what he's after?" Fanny doubted darkly, having duly turned the matter over in her mind.

"I'm sure you'd think so, if you had heard him."

"I don't know. . . . Of course, he was your property long enough, you ought to know his wretched little ways. But I wouldn't trust any man to mean what he says to a woman under such circumstances."

"Fanny! how long is it since you set up to be such a cynic?"

"As long as I've been an honest married woman, darling. I think the first thing a woman with her wits about her learns, once she begins to convalesce from that foolish bride feeling, is that men are just as treacherous as we are in affairs of the heart, so-called. Anyway, if your Bellamy were mine, he'd wait a long time for me to give him his freedom, precisely as long as he insisted on sticking round and making me uncomfortable . . . The most outrageous proceeding I ever heard of!"

"I don't see through Bel, myself," Lucinda admitted. "You'd think it would be the last thing he'd do. Of course —I'll speak to Harry about it tonight—we can't stay, we'll have to move as soon as we finish this picture."

"We're lucky to be as well along as we are, in that case. Barry Nolan said today he expected to finish up in two weeks more."

"Then there's no time to be wasted. Your husband will have to begin looking for new studio accommodations right away; though I haven't the least idea where we'll find them, if Bel told the truth."

"It's barely possible he did, of course. And then it's equally possible that he's taking advantage of the demand exceeding the supply to force you out of the business, assuming you'll quit Zinn's even if it involves suspending production, rather than be made miserable by seeing him every day. In which case, of course, he'll have some other scheme ready to make it difficult if not impossible for you to resume."

"Heavens! what a wild-eyed theory, Fanny!"

"Any more wild-eyed, pray, than the facts in the case? —than what Bellamy has done in leasing space in the same studio with a woman whom he has every reason for wishing to avoid, if one can believe a word he says! Cindy: don't tell me you believe Bellamy Druce ever left New York, his home and his friends, to come out here and muck about Hollywood because he likes it, or because he's discontented with having been no better than a drone

all his life long and wants to redeem himself by doing something worth-while? If *that's* his motive, in Heaven's name! what made him pick out the motion-picture business?"

"It is funny," Lucinda confessed. "I don't pretend to understand . . . "

No more did she. But the seeds of suspicion that conversation planted took root readily and flowered into a dark jungle of strange, involuted fancies in which fears ran wild until Lynn Summerlad came home to charm them all asleep. Lucinda only needed to see him, indeed, to forget her troubles altogether and become once more the voluntary thrall of a species of intoxication as potent to her senses as a drug.

The Lontaines had arranged a supper party at Santa Monica in Summerlad's honour for that night, but considerately had neglected to preface it with dinner. So the lovers had the hours till eleven to themselves. At seven Summerlad called, finding his way unannounced to Lucinda's sitting-room. She went to his arms with a cry of joy, buried her face on his shoulder, clung to him as if she would never let him go.

"I've missed you so, Lynn, I've missed you so!"

He seemed startled and unmistakably affected by the artlessness of this confession, and held her close, comforting her with all the time-old and tested responses of the lovers' litany, with a tenderness in his voice more deep and true than he had ever sounded in the most impassioned moments of his wooing.

"But, my dearest girl! you're trembling. What is it? Tell me . . . "

"It's so wonderful to have you back, Lynn. Don't ever leave me for so long again."

"You tempt me to," he laughed indulgently. "I think you've learned to love me better while I've been away than you did in all the while that I was here!"

She answered with an odd little laugh of love and deprecation: "I really think I have . . . "

They dined at Marcelle's, not the happiest selection for their first few hours together, for the place was thronged with picture-folk, as it is always of a Saturday, and acquaintances were continually running over to their table to tell Summerlad how glad they were to see him back. Practically the only moments they had alone were when they danced; so they made excuse to leave early, that they might drive to Santa Monica by the most roundabout way.

Nothing was wanting to endue that drive with every illusion of a dream. Spring was so well advanced that the night air, windless, was as warm as it would ever be in Summer. There was again a moon, as on that first night when Summerlad had driven Lucinda and the Lontaines home from dinner at his bungalow and on the way had turned aside to show Lucinda from that high place in the hills all the provinces of her new kingdom mapped out beneath her. Summerlad's car, its superb motor in perfect tune, made light of speed laws on lonely roads far from the main-travelled ways that link the towns. On the back seat, snuggled into the hollow of Summerlad's arm, Lucinda rested a long time in contented silence, watching the molten magic of the night fling itself at their faces, dissolve, blend into rushing shadows, and sweep behind, to music of cloven air like fairy laughter. How could she ever have been so stupid as to harbour a thought disloyal to this land of dim enchantment?

"It is too perfect," she murmured at length, "too sweet to last. It can't last, I know it can't!"

"Why not? So long as we love, what's to prevent all beauty lasting?"

"Life. I mean"—it took all her courage to speak of what she had till then purposely kept back—"Bellamy."

Summerlad's arm tightened protectingly around her,

"What about him? Has he come back? Been annoying you any way? Tell me about it."

She told him her version of that noon-hour meeting at the studio, Summerlad swearing softly beneath his breath as he listened.

"So you see, my dear—as I said—it can't last. We can't continue to work together in the same studio, with Bel spying on us, or able to do so any time he happens to want to. I'll have to move—you can't, of course, because your contract is with Zinn himself. And I imagine—in fact, I'm sure—the best thing for us both is for me to leave Los Angeles altogether for at least six months."

"Go away from Los Angeles? From me! Linda, you can't mean it."

"Only to make it possible to be nearer to you when I come back, dear. I mean, I must go to Reno, where I should have gone in the first place. If I had, these impossible conditions Bel has brought about could never have been."

"Oh, damn your husband!"

"I don't know: he's making things awkward for us, truly, but perhaps in the end we'll be grateful to him. If it weren't for Bel, it's quite likely I'd keep on putting off my divorce rather than be separated from you for so long. But after all, what are six months, when they earn us the right to spend all our lives together afterwards?"

Lynn made no answer, other than to hold her more tightly. She twisted round to look up into his face. The moonlight showed it set in a scowling cast.

"What's the matter, Lynn? Don't you think as I do about Reno?"

"Of course," the man muttered. "But I don't fancy your being away from me so long. Six months! Anything can happen in six months."

The car was swinging into the streets of Santa Monica. Lucinda gave him her lips.

"Let's forget it for tonight. Kiss me again while there's time."

The restaurant to which the Lontaines had bidden them was the one in those times most favoured by the froth of the picture colony for its weekly night of carnival; an immense pavilion by the sea, but too small by half for the crowds that besieged it toward midnight every Saturday, pathetically keen to rub shoulders with celebrity in its hours of relaxation from arduous labours before the camera. When Lucinda and Summerlad arrived the velvet rope across the entrance was holding back a throng ten deep, a singularly patient and indefatigable lot, its faces all turned in hope toward the lights beyond, eager to catch the eye of the proprietor, though informed by sad experience that the reward would be what it always was for those who had failed to make reservations, a coldly indifferent shake of the head and nothing more. Through this fringe prayers and elbows opened a sullen way till Summerlad's unusual height won recognition from within, and he passed through with Lucinda to a place where pandemonium set to jazz ruled under light restraint.

Round the four walls and encroaching upon the cramped floor for dancing, tables were so closely ranked that passage between them was generally impracticable. It seemed little short of miraculous that so many people could be crowded even into that huge hall, incredible that they should care to be. Yet everybody of any consequence in the studios was there, and everybody knew everybody else and called him by his first name—preferably at the top of his lungs. Much fraternizing went on between the tables, much interchange of the bottles of which at least one was smuggled in by each male patron as a point of honour, against the perfunctory prohibition of the management posted in staring letters at the entrance. An insane orchestra dominated the din by fits and starts, playing snatches of fox-trots and one-steps just long enough at a time to

permit a couple to make half the round of the dance floor at the meditative gait imposed by the mob massed upon it, then stopping to let a leather-lunged ballyhoo bullyrag the dancers into contributing their cash as a bribe for further measures. When the musicians rested and the floor was cleared, impromptu exhibitions of foolery were staged by slapstick clowns and applauded with shrieks and catcalls. The women present, mostly young—for the camera has little use for years beyond the earliest stages of maturity—exhibited themselves in every degree of undress short of downright déshabille. Masculine Hollywood as a rule thriftily saves its evening clothes for service under the Kliegs.

Lontaine's party, a large one, comprising the most influential members of the colony with whom he and Summerlad were on agreeable terms, had been long enough in session already to have become individually exalted and collectively hilarious. Summerlad it took to its bosom with shouts of acclaim, and he seemed to find it easy to catch the spirit of the gathering. But Lucinda sat with it and yet apart from it, a little mused. She could not drink enough to be in tune with her company, and would not if she could. A sense of frustration oppressed her. Before her dreaming eyes the pageant passed again of hills and fields asleep in sweet glamour of moonlight, breathing pastoral fragrance upon the night. She had been happy half an hour since. Here in this heady atmosphere of perfumed flesh, tobacco reek and pungent alcohol, the idyl of her evening grew faint and fled. While the man she loved had no regrets.

In a moment of disconcerting lucidity she saw him as a strange man, flushed with drink and blown with license, looking on other women with a satyr's appraising eyes, bandying ribald wheezes with the lips she had so lately kissed. And she winced and drew away, recalling that abandon of affection with which she had given herself to

his embrace at the hotel, feeling of a sudden soiled and shop-worn as from common handling.

A strange man, a man she had known but a few brief weeks!

Covertly watching him, she saw Summerlad in the middle of a passage of persiflage start and fall silent, his lips in an instant wiped bare of speech. And following the line of his stare, she espied, at some distance, at a table near the edge of the dance-floor, Bellamy sitting with a woman.

He saw her but made no sign more than to intensify his meaning smile, and immediately returned courteous attention to his companion.

At this last Lucinda stared in doubt for several seconds, she was so changed. But finery that shrieked of money spent without stint or taste could hardly disguise the wild and ragged loveliness of Nelly Marquis.

XXXII

IN a freak of unaccountable reluctance to believe it was really the Marquis girl, Lucinda looked a second time. More than a month had passed since that brief, distressing chapter of their acquaintance, which Lucinda had put out of mind so completely that her efforts to recall the features of the other conjured up only a foggy impression of a shabby, haggard, haunted shadow, by turns wistful and feebly defiant, that bore what might be no more than chance likeness to this figure of flaunting extravagance at Bellamy's table.

A question forming on her lips, Lucinda turned back to Summerlad, but surprised the tail of his eye veering hastily away, and fancied a shade of over-elaboration in the easy, incurious air he was quick to resume; as if he wished her to believe he either hadn't noticed those two or else saw no significance in their association on terms apparently so intimate and mutually diverting.

So she held her tongue for a while, till the comforting suggestion offered that Lynn in all probability had but sought to spare her feelings . . .

She stole another glance across the room. By every indication Bellamy found his company most entertaining; he was paying her sallies a tribute of smiling attention which she as evidently found both grateful and inspiring. It was plain that she had had enough to drink and something more; but on that question she held strong views of her own, and while Lucinda was looking drained her highball glass and with an air peremptory and arch planted it in front of Bellamy to be replenished; a service which

he rendered with the aid of a pocket flask—adding to his own glass, however, water only.

Not that *that* necessarily meant anything. Bellamy knew the chances were that Lucinda was watching him. Still, one had to admit he was showing none of those too familiar symptoms; in that gathering, where the cold sober were few and far between, Bel looked conspicuously so. Was he, then, to be believed when he insisted he had finally foresworn alcohol in remorse for having driven Lucinda to leave him? One wondered . . .

Summerlad was eyeing her with a quizzical air. Lucinda managed half a smile.

"Having a good time, Linda?"

"I can't complain." A slight movement of shoulders rounded out the innuendo.

Summerlad made a mouth of concern. "Tired, dear? Want to go home?"

"Afraid Fanny and Harry wouldn't like it . . . "

Was one unfair in reading disappointment where Lynn wished solicitude only to be read?

"How about another little drink?" Lucinda shook her head decidedly. "Well, then: what say we dance?"

She surveyed the crowded floor dubiously. "It's an awful crush, I'm afraid . . . " Nevertheless she got up and threaded the jostling tables with Lynn at her heels: anything for respite from the racket the Lontaines and their crew were kicking up.

Odd, how those two, so quiet and well-behaved when she had first met them in New York, had let go in this demoralizing atmosphere of what Fanny had rechristened the loose and windy West. Odd, but in a way quite British. The Anglo-Saxon temperament inclines to lose its head once the shackles of home-grown public opinion are stricken off. Long ago a wise man pointed out that there wouldn't be any night life in Paris worth mentioning if it weren't for strict enforcement of the early closing law in London. . . .

It was an awful crush. Few better dancers than Lynn Summerlad ever trod a ball-room floor, but even he was put to it to steer a safe course in that welter. It was, after all, not much of an improvement on sitting still and trying to appear unaware of Bellamy and that weird Marquis creature. Lucinda felt sure, now, she had not been mistaken about the girl, but concluded to ask Lynn anyway; and her lips were parting with this intention when she heard a hiss of breath indrawn and looked up to see Lynn's face disfigured by a spasm of pain. In the same instant he stopped short, in the next he groaned between set teeth.

"Have to get out of this, I'm afraid," he grunted. "My foot—somebody with a hoof like a sledge-hammer landed on it just now. That wouldn't matter, only the confounded thing got caught between a couple of logs while we were doing that river stuff. The swelling went down several days ago, and to tell the truth I'd forgotten about it . . . But this reminds me plenty!"

He had an affecting limp on the way back to their table, where he delayed long enough to tell his story and receive commiserations, then announced that, though desolated to leave such a promising young party, he would have to get home and out of his shoes before he could hope to know another instant's ease. If the Lontaines wouldn't mind seeing that Lucinda got back to the Hollywood all right . . .

The Lontaines were ready enough to undertake that responsibility, but Lucinda wouldn't hear of staying on. Lynn's chauffeur could as well as not take her to the Hollywood after dropping Lynn in Beverly Hills. . . . She was glad enough of the excuse, of course, but she did resent, what she couldn't help covertly looking for on the way out, the sardonic glint in Bel's eyes.

Really, Bel's effrontery seemed to know no limit. To protest at noon that "casual women" meant nothing to him any more, and at midnight to make public parade of his interest in a demi-rep! On top of that, to give his

wife that odious look of understanding when she passed him with Summerlad, a look implying privity to some indecorous secret involving them!

Simmering indignation rendered her demeanour unsympathetic, perhaps, while Lynn was being made as comfortable as might be in his car, with the shoe removed from his poor hurt foot and the latter extended on one of the forward seats. And for some minutes after they had got under way she maintained, in the face of inquisitive sidelong glances, a silence which Lynn seemed loath to break. But in time it began to wear upon his nerves.

"Cross, sweetheart?" he enquired gently. "I'm sorry you let me drag you away——"

"It isn't that," Lucinda replied, almost brusquely. "I wasn't enjoying myself, anyway—wanted to leave almost as soon as we arrived."

"Then what is it?"

She asked evasively: "How's your foot?"

"Much better, thanks. Guess I must've dislocated one of the smaller bones, in that logging stunt. It doesn't feel just right. I'll get an osteopath in tomorrow morning and see what he makes of it."

"It really was hurt while we were dancing, then?"

"What do you think? That I'd make a fuss like that and spoil my party just for fun?"

"I thought possibly you were pretending on my account."

"You mean, because your husband was there."

"So you did see him, after all."

"Yes—but rather hoped you hadn't."

"He wasn't alone, Lynn."

"I noticed that, too."

"It was Miss Marquis, wasn't it?"

"Yes, Linda—afraid it was."

"Afraid——?"

"Your amiable husband's in for an interesting life, if that young woman has got her claws into him."

"Lynn: where do you suppose the girl has been all this time, since that night she left the hotel?"

"Good Lord! how should I know?"

"People don't drop out of sight like that in Hollywood. One keeps meeting them if they're in Town, one can't help it—there are so few places to go. It seems funny she should disappear so completely for—how long is it? four weeks? five?—and then turn up in Bel's company."

"It is funny," Summerlad agreed in a tone that rang true.

"I'm only wondering where he fell in with her."

"Well," Lynn submitted: "I daresay if you were to ask him . . . "

"Or if you were to ask her!"

But immediately Lucinda repented her resentment of what she had hastily taken to be an attempt to becloud impatience with ill-timed levity. For Lynn treated her to the reproof of a sulky silence, in which he persisted till she felt constrained, in self-justification, to adopt the very tone that had vexed her.

"Or don't you think that would be a good idea, Lynn?"

The man shifted in his corner till he sat half-facing her, his manner seriously defensive.

"Look here, Linda! I've known a long time you suspected there was something between this Marquis girl and me—or had been——"

"Wait a minute, Lynn: I may be stupid, women in love usually are, they say; but that thought never crossed my mind before the moment when, back there in the restaurant, I saw you didn't want me to know you'd seen her."

"Then it must have been my conscience, I guess." Lynn fumbled for and found her hand beneath the rug that covered their knees. "You see——"

"Oh, I see!" Lucinda snapped, and drew her hand away.

"No, you don't——"

"But I do, Lynn: and I'm quite reasonable about it.

Only, I presume, I needed this to make me understand the kind of man I'd given my heart to."

"That's unfair. You know perfectly, nine times out of ten the man isn't to blame. Besides——"

"Say, rather, I have wit enough to know the causes underlying every form of human relationship are obscure past comprehending. . . . It isn't a question with me of blame or excuse, it's just a feeling that's suddenly come over me, a thought come home I've been refusing to think ever since we fell in love, Lynn, that I've committed my life to the care of a man who can never be wholly mine, whom I must always share with his memories of other sweethearts."

"Well, but what about *my* feelings? Do you suppose it makes me happy to be all the time reminded that Bellamy Druce——?"

"Please, dear, don't. Forgive me—I couldn't help it. Besides, there's this to be said: if I did love another man before I met you, he was the only one; while you have known so many loves like—like this Marquis girl—not, you know, not quite——"

"Oh, I get you!" Summerlad laughed harshly. "You don't have to be more plain-spoken. And I can't deny you've got some excuse. On the other hand, if you love me, you must love me for what I am, not as I might have been if I'd stuck to pounding the ivories in Winona's leading nickelodeon."

"Pounding the ivories?"

"Playing piano in a moving-picture theatre in a Wisconsin village."

"I thought you told us, one night, you'd never done any work before going into pictures?"

"Wouldn't call that work," Summerlad explained in haste and not too convincingly. "Work is something that puts real money in the old pay envelope. I'd be ashamed to tell you what the nickelodeon handed me Saturday nights. But it was just a sort of a lark for me. The reg-

ular orchestra was an old schoolmate of mine and when he went on his vacation I doubled for him, you see. Of course my folks kicked like steers about my taking a common job like that, but I thought it was fun; and watching the screen for music cues put it into my head I could show 'em something if I ever got a chance in pictures." . . . Here Summerlad was troubled by a dim reminiscence of some statement with which this account, likewise, failed to jibe, and sheered back to his former thread of argument. "Anyway, you're all wrong about Nelly Marquis. She's one that didn't happen, if you've got to know the truth."

"Oh!" Lucinda commented without emotion—"didn't she?"

"Along with a hundred others I get the credit for——"

"I daresay, by Hollywood standards, 'credit' is the right word."

"Oh, hang it all, Linda! you *must* understand. A man in my line . . . Oh, you know how it is . . . There'll always be women ready to make fools of themselves over any man who manages to get a certain degree of prominence. And an actor has got to keep in the public eye. Men are just as bad, for that matter; they'll run in circles around an actress, simply because she's on the stage, who can't hold a candle for looks or good disposition to the little girl who lives two doors away on their home street. I met Nelly Marquis shortly after I'd made my first real dent in pictures. She'd come out here to try her luck, after some experience on the legitimate stage. She was so hard hit I used to be afraid to leave the house until I'd sent out scouts to make sure the coast was clear. I've always thought that trouble of hers was more than half responsible for her mania about me."

"What trouble?"

"Dope. She's a hop nut. Coke—cocaine's her big bet. That's what her friend the doctor boggled about telling you—must've been the trouble, that time you found her

stretched out: an overdose. I didn't like to tell you because—well, frankly, I didn't want you to think I knew so much about the girl."

"Oh, what a pity!"

"I can't hold myself responsible——"

"But why should you?"

"I mean, I don't believe it was simply disappointment drove her to it. . . . Hang it! I can't seem to help talking like an ass tonight. What I'm trying to say is this: Nelly took to the dope after I'd met her, but only, I believe, because she got in with the wrong crowd. That's easy in Hollywood. It's hard to tell till you are in with them. And there's an awful lot of that sort of thing goes on more or less quietly out here. They lead one another on. When they've tried everything else they take a chance on the hop to see if there's really anything in it; and then they're gone. They drift into little cliques and have parties, ether parties and that sort of thing, you know, where they choose one by lot to stay off the stuff and watch the others to make sure nobody strangles to death while they lie around him in a circle——"

Lucinda lifted her hands to her ears. "Please, Lynn, please! I don't want to hear any more. It's too dreadful!"

"I'm sorry. I only wanted you to understand why I felt I had to warn you against Nelly. She's unfortunate, God knows, but she's dangerous, too. They all are, once the stuff gets a hold on them, there's nothing they won't do, no lie they won't tell . . . "

"And this is what goes on in this earthly paradise!"

"It isn't California, it isn't Hollywood, it's human nature, one sort of human nature. You'll find the same thing going on in every big city; read the newspaper accounts of the campaign against the drug traffic. Only, out here we know more about it, because the studios make it more or less one big village, and it's hard to keep anything quiet, talk will get about . . . "

They were drawing near the cross-road that led to Summerlad's bungalow. He bent forward and spoke to the driver, and the car held on toward Hollywood.

"I'm taking you home first, Linda. My foot isn't troubling me now to speak of, and . . . Well: talking about how rapidly gossip spreads made me think it would be better you shouldn't be seen driving up to my place with me at this time of night."

With a stabbing pain of loneliness and penitence, Lucinda perceived that she had only Lynn's love and consideration to rely upon for salvation from the gins and pitfalls of this outré world in which she lived, self-outlawed from her kind. No one else cared, not another soul in all Los Angeles would lift a hand in her behalf save at the dictates of self-interest.

And in a sudden passion she turned and clung to him again, begging forgiveness for her suspicions and complaints. And Summerlad soothed her, patting gently the head that rested on his shoulder, smiling over it confidentially at the smiling midnight moon.

XXXIII

LUCINDA dated from that Saturday the dawn of a fortnight when everything went wrong for her with such regularity that, in the end, the burden of its crosses grew too sore, the woman had been something more than merely mortal whose stores of fortitude and forbearance had not run low.

Naturally she blamed Bellamy . . .

In a way he asked for this, giving her too little chance to forget that the sunlight had been kind before his shadow fell again athwart her eyes. Now when skies were overcast and the wind had a tooth, Bel figured in the picture as a sort of stormy petrel, forever to be seen wheeling somewhere within the vague of the horizon.

Fare where she would on diversion bent, Lucinda seemed fated always to encounter Bel, and too often in the company of the Marquis girl; while at the studio it didn't matter much which way she turned, she could hardly avoid the sight of her husband buzzing about on the business of his new enterprise, and apparently finding it all great fun.

To one who recalled the dilettante Bellamy of New York days, there was matter enough for amazement in the gusto he had lately discovered for work that nothing required him to do, in the amount of real energy, enterprise and excutive ability which he was contributing to this new amusement. For Lucinda refused to take seriously his infatuation with the motion-picture business; it wasn't real, she insisted to herself, it wouldn't last, he was putting it on just to plague her . . .

None the less he went to work with a will, and took little

more than a week to assemble a producing unit, engage a company of players, and cause camera-work to be begun under the direction of one who, observed occasionally and from a distance, conveyed a refreshing impression of quiet authority.

Inasmuch as special sets could hardly have been designed and erected on such short notice, most of the company's first activities were staged away from the studio, "on location," and Lucinda knew nothing of them save through hearsay. Gossip had it, however, that Bellamy was employing no star to carry his initial production, but was rather making a "special"—the term which the motion-picture trade reads to mean a picture basing its claims solely on the strength of its story as interpreted by a well-balanced cast. Glimpses of Nelly Marquis in make-up, now and then, warranted the assumption that she had been given a part in the picture.

But their paths seldom crossed, notwithstanding that they were using the same studio, and when it did the young woman somehow always happened to be possessed by an abstraction too profound to permit of her seeing Lucinda.

Bel, on the other hand, was already ready with a smile and a friendly hail—"The top of the morning to you, Miss Lee! 'Tis hopeful I am the work, God bless it! is doing well"—or some similar absurdity; but never a hint that there had ever been any terms between them other than the most formal.

Gratitude for this much consideration rendered it no more easy to respond in the same spirit. Lucinda had never known anything more baffling than the absence of any justifiable grounds for objecting to Bel's presence in the studio. For if it were her privilege to seek to become a star of the cinema, it was equally his to launch out as a producer. . . .

The daily disappointment that waited on efforts to find other quarters aggravated her sense of hardship. Lu-

cinda learned to listen impatiently for the expressions of despair which unfailingly wound up Lontaine's reports: "If we've got to clear out of this—I don't know, Linda—I'm afraid it means either buy or build." She began to be afraid it did. Studio accommodations were reported never to have been so much in demand on the Coast. Every available stage was doing double duty, two companies crowding their activities wherever possible into a space formerly reserved for one. Neither knew they any rest by night, when belated souls would see the great roofs of glass livid with the incandescence of Cooper-Hewitt tubes, burning like vast green opals against the dense blue-black of early morning skies.

The tidal wave of the cinema craze that in those years swept the world was rearing its golden crest to its giddiest height; and the people of the studios rode in glee where the aureate spindrift blew, reckless of the law that every wave that lifts must fall, too drunk with money, altitude and speed to know that already, beneath their very feet, the crest was curving in upon itself, the fanged rocks were waiting.

Zinn, wily campaigner that he was by instinct and training, shrewd reader of signs and portents illegible to the general, foresaw the coming débâcle and—when he had made every provision against being overwhelmed in it—assumed in private the prophet's mantle.

"Been a good game while it lasted," he observed to Lucinda one day, "but it's on its way now, all right. I was reading a piece in the paper last night, all about how California seen three big booms, that time when they discovered gold, next a real estate speculation craze, and now the movin'-pictures. The first two blew up, same as this will before long. I guess I and you are lucky fools to of got a look in while the going was good."

"Lucky?" Lucinda questioned dubiously.

A grin of indescribable irony glimmered on the swarthy, shrewd features. "Something to tell the kiddies about

when they gather around your knee, Miss Lee: 'What Grandma done and seen in the wild old days in Hollywood.'"

"I don't know about that. And what makes you think times will ever be different?"

"Take it from me, little lady, things can't hold up much longer the way they been in pictures. Nobody with a brain in his bean would look for it. Trouble is, nobody like that would take the fillum business serious when it was learning to walk. Now it's wearing long pants and driving its own machine, it's no use expecting it to listen to what brains got to tell it. All the same, if it don't—good *night!*

"Ah, I see what's going on all the time! Audiences sick of punk pictures and putting up a howl for better, producers combing the world for authors, artists, dramatists, all the people what have got the stuff pictures need to make 'em good—and the old guard back here dug in and ready to die before they'll surrender the trenches to anybody that knows more'n they do. And why wouldn't they? It's meat and drink and gasoline to them to keep things going like they are. Where'd be the sense in them giving the glad hand to the guy who's got it in him to do them out of a nice soft job?

"Take authors, now. We're having a big run on authors just't present. The producer figures anybody who's got brains enough to write a novel that won't wobble if a person gives it a hard look, ought to have brains enough to do as good with a picture story. But does he get a chanst? Don't make me laugh. The poor simps come out here on every train with their eyes shining, full of joy and pep on account of what the producers promised they was going to let 'em do in pictures. And every train takes 'em back. What's the answer?

"The answer gen'ly's a bird in ridin'-breeches and a property high-brow, calls himself director-general or something gaudy like that—same bird's been making the

pictures the producers want to make better. He gives Friend Author the glad smile and a hard look and starts right in telling him all what he can't do in pictures. Author wants to know how come. 'Because I say you can't, and I know everything they is to know about pictures.' Author asks producer what about it. Producer says, says he: 'If my director-general says you can't, stands to reason you can't. Say: how do you get this way? I brought you out here to learn you to make pictures, not for you to learn my director-general.' Author sees the point and fades back East. Director-general tells producer: 'Too bad about that poor fish, but he didn't savvy the picture angle, and I couldn't make him see it nohow.'

"Or take another case. Producer buys a big story, like, now . . . "

"Paradise Lost," Lucinda suggested mischievously.

"Who wrote it?"

"John Milton."

"Never heard of him. Make a good picture?"

"I'm afraid it would be difficult. But it's a big story."

"All right. Producer hands this, now, *Paradise Lost* to his scenario editor. She reads it, turns pale around the gills, sends out an emergency call for the director-general, says to him, says she: 'Listen, sweetheart, this'll be a knock-out if it ever gets on the screen the way it's wrote. The guy what wrote this knew pictures before they was invented.' Director-general says: 'Gosh! that won't never do, or first thing you know we'll have this boob Milton on the lot telling us our business. Stew up the continuity to suit yourself, pet, and leave the rest to me.' Fin'ly *Paradise Lost* gets on the screen as 'A Cyril de Menthe Production entitled Sex Against Sex, by Queenie Hoozis, featuring Hope Honeybunch with bathroom fixtures by Joseph Urban and telephones hidden by Sherlock Holmes, suggested by a magazine story by J. Milton.' If it gets by, Queenie and Cyril cop the credit. If it falls down they tell the producer they done their best, but he'd ought

to of known better, it ain't no use trying to make pictures only from stories framed special for the screen by somebody who cut their eye-teeth on a strip of celluloid—like Queenie. Every time anything like that happens the fillum business takes a long stride forward—towards the end of its rope."

"Still, I don't quite see——"

"It comes down to this, Miss Lee: nothing short of an earthquake's ever going to jar the Queenies and Cyrils loose from their jobs and give brains a chanst to horn in."

"But if you see all this so clearly, Mr. Zinn, why don't you start the indicated reforms yourself?"

"Who, me? Naw, naw, little lady; quit your kidding. I don't know enough. Me try to sit in with sure-enough brains? Say! I seen the way you looked when I wanted to know who wrote *Paradise Lost*. No: Isadore Zinn belongs in with the rest of the bunch that's been good enough up to about now but's got to be junked before pictures will get a chanst to be any better'n they ought to be. Oh, I ain't got no kick coming; I've made mine and put it away where nothing real mean's ever going to happen to it; and when the sky falls on Hollywood it'll find me some other place, playing pinochle and absolutely innocent of the en-tire fillum business."

"You don't seriously believe that will ever happen."

"It'll happen just as quick's Wall Street wakes up to the way it's been gypped—and it's moaning and tossing in its sleep right now. Wall Street put up its good money because pictures made half-way on the level earned more and earned it quicker'n any other investment they could find. Wall Street didn't worry none about what graft was being gotten away with as long's they thought they was going to get their money back and a hundred per cent. profit every so often. But that was yesterday, when audiences would shell out cheerful and sit through anything because pictures moved. Today they're still lining up at the box-office, but only because they can't believe

the day won't never come when they'll maybe see something worth their time and coin. Tomorrow they'll be saying, 'Show me!' before they'll dig up as much's a thin dime. And that's when Wall Street's due to tumble to it, they's only one way for it to save its investments in the fillum game, and that is take hold of it and run it like a honest-to-goodness business. And when that happens, when the fancy salaries get pared down to the quick, and the good graft's all gone, and there ain't no way no more for the assistant property-man to charge the upkeep of his lady-friend's limousine to overhead, and the director what wants money to build ancient Rome with and burn it down for a showy interlude to a society comedy will only get the hearty laugh—why, along about that time a terrible lot of people are going to find out California's a cold, hard place, spite of the climate and all, and a heap of highly hand-painted automobiles is going to be dumped on the used-car market in Los Angeles."

Some disturbing mental echo of this screed one day inspired Lucinda to devote several painful hours to totting up her bank account, a duty which she had been religiously forgetting for months, and whose performance brought to light the fact that she had already given Harry Lontaine cheques to his order in the sum of two-hundred and ten thousand dollars, to be cashed by him and deposited to the credit of Linda Lee Inc.

If she felt slightly dashed by this discovery, it was less because of the money involved—for she had from the first been prepared to pay more dearly for her whistle than Lontaine had declared it would cost—than because the end was not yet, the first picture remained unfinished, many heavy payments on account of it were still to be met, and her private extravagances, added to the financing of Linda Lee Inc., had left little worth mentioning of the money which Harford Willis, at her requisition, had paid into her drawing account in New York.

It was now necessary to write Willis and ask him to

find her more money; and that involved, as a matter of simple courtesy to that old friend and a devoted steward of her interests, explanations which she would much rather not make just yet.

But her only other course was to consult Lontaine in the faint hope that out of the sums entrusted to him there might be enough left in the company's treasury to see it through the present production. And this she hesitated to do because of an intuitive feeling that he would take this as directly challenging his competency to handle her money if not his good faith. Lontaine was such a sensitive soul . . . However, he spared her the pain of deciding to do nothing, for the next time they met he blandly advised Lucinda that the company could do with another twenty thousand as soon as she could find time to draw the cheque; and on learning that it would have to wait a few days, or until she could hear from Willis, seemed considerably discountenanced; or else fancy misled her.

As for that, it might have been merely her fancy that Lontaine thenceforward betrayed a disposition to keep out of her way, and when he couldn't was at pains to iron out the wrinkles in his temper before venturing to respond to her always friendly advances; that perceptible hesitation prefaced the utterances Lontaine addressed to her, constraint had crept into their relations, till then so easy and cordial, and added opacity was to be remarked in the stare of those introspective blue eyes.

Since it was unthinkable that she should be long embarrassed, for want of ready money, or that Lontaine should believe she could be, Lucinda couldn't imagine why he should show such signals of a mind perturbed, and could only do her best to dwell upon the matter not at all. Heaven knew she had other worries a-plenty to cope with!

It was annoying, for example, to feel that one was expected to feign blindness to what was going on under one's very nose, namely Fanny's essays in the ancient and

vulgar art of vamping, with Bel in the rôle of voluntary victim—or a vastly better actor than he had ever before shown himself to be. Nor did the quite transparent naïvete of Fanny's methods, as Lucinda viewed them, cause patience to be any the less a labored virtue. If you asked Lucinda, Hollywood had added no finish to Fanny's cosmopolitan technique of flirtation, but rather the reverse; in this respect, as in too many others, Fanny seemed to have taken on a shade too much the colour of her environment. One looked and made allowances for the crudely obvious in women educated by directors to believe that certain elementary gestures (for which see any screen) were surely efficacious with men of every class alike. But Fanny knew better than to make herself grotesque.

Such, however, was the one word that seemed to suit the way she went with Bellamy. And when one had watched her practise and repeat without end the trick of the upward, sham-timid glance of eyes demurely wise, accompanied by the provocative pout of aggressively kissable life, the look that said openly: I think you're rather nice and I know I am; so why are we wasting time?—and had seen it work an apparently invariable effect upon one who called himself a man of the world, who should long since have graduated from the social kindergartens where such tactics are vogue—well, one simply longed to cuff his ears and tell him to quit being such a silly fool. It gave one furiously to repent having relinquished the right to bestow upon Bel gratuitous advice for his own good.

Wherefore it came to pass that, as a general thing, whenever Fanny was wanted for a scene and was not to be found in the neighbourhood of the set, she would ultimately be discovered somewhere on the lot, more often than not in the most public corner of it, industriously rehearsing her wiles for the debatable benefit of Bellamy.

And this the man who had declared that his besetting

sin had lost all savour for him since it had done its part to alienate his wife!

Lucinda nevertheless assured herself that she didn't so much mind Bel's inconsistency—for what were his protestations to her today?—or even Fanny's commonplace coquetries; it was the surreptitious airs with which Fanny sought to envelop these goings-on, the reticence which she persisted in observing in respect of their effect, that made their joint stupidity maddening. For never since that afternoon when Bel had caught Lucinda in the act of kissing Summerlad before a camera, and Fanny had playfully announced her intention of vamping him to a fare-ye-well, had she chosen to mention his name in any relation to herself. In the local vernacular which she had been so quick to pick up, Fanny seemed to think she was getting away with something.

Lucinda resisted the temptation to disillusion her friend mostly because of a faint-hearted hope that Fanny might at any moment redeem herself with a scornful report of Bel's gullibility, but in part because of doubt whether Bel were being taken in as completely as he appeared to be. It was just possible that this old hand at philandering was simply playing Fanny's game to find out what she meant by it. Certainly he showed no propensity to favouritism. The path of his amourette with the Marquis girl ran parallel to that which he pursued with Fanny, perhaps ran faster, but strangely proved not half so tiresome to the spectator. In spite of all that Summerlad had said of her, Lucinda entertained an honest admiration for the Marquis as she was today, considered her physically quite a fascinating creature, which she unquestionably was in this revised phase, and found what Bel saw in her far more easy to understand than what he saw in Fanny. This was something partly to be accounted for by the circumstance that Lucinda saw comparatively so little of Miss Marquis, saw her so seldom save at a distance and when she was on her dignity—when, as Summerlad had it, she had

slapped on thick the make-up of a lady. That it was in good measure make-up merely Lucinda had memories to testify. For all that, she saw the girl comporting herself toward Bellamy with a manner which she thought Fanny might have copied to good profit. But when she confided as much to Summerlad she found him darkly suspicious of Nelly's present good behaviour.

"Don't worry," he advised: "That young woman will surprise you yet. She's being nice now and enjoying the novelty. Chances are she took the cure, that time she disappeared. But it never lasts. Once the old hop gets its hooks into anybody it never lets go, really. It may seem to be licked for a while, but it's only waiting for a moment of weakness. Wait till Nelly gets bored playing up to the gentlemanly attentions of your friend, Mr. Druce, wait till she wants him to do something he doesn't want to. Just wait. If you admire fireworks, believe me, Linda, your waiting won't be wasted."

Having said which, Summerlad made haste to change the subject. But Lucinda had already learned that any reference to Nelly Marquis was calculated to make him restive. A circumstance in itself not the least irksome of the many which she counted as afflictions. She needed badly a congenial confidant, and Lynn was newly become anything but that, had, indeed, never seemed quite the same since the first night of his return. Another black mark to add to Bellamy's score. For Lynn was inevitably and pardonably disgusted with the situation at the studio, where he couldn't turn around without running into either the Marquis girl or the husband of the woman he loved. Then much of the old delight in sharing working-quarters had been lost through their tacit agreement that, under these changed conditions, a trifle more reserve wouldn't come amiss when they met under the public eye. But now, even when they were alone, the old-time spontaneity was missing, and, Lucinda was sure, through no fault of hers. It was in Lynn that she thought to detect a strange new

absence of ease, what she could almost have termed a hangdog air, a furtive fashion of watching her, if he thought she wasn't aware, that was swift to change, as soon as he found she was, to a species of feeble bravado distastefully reminiscent of Bel when Bel had been drinking just enough to feel it and not enough to have become callous; an air of having done something he oughtn't and living in instant dread of being found out.

Lynn had such an air with her, that is, if Lucinda were not self-deceived, if she didn't imagine it all, if it were anything but an hallucination conjured up by a mind morbidly conscious of Bel's shadow in the offing, the shadow of that relationship which, while unresolved, must ever rest between the lover and the wife.

XXXIV

BUT these peculiar tribulations rankled neither severally nor even in their sum more distressfully than did the trouble at the studio, where daily the tension of ill-feeling betwen actress and director grew more taut, as Lucinda's earlier misgivings ripened into articulate dissatisfaction with Nolan's methods and their fruits, and as that sensitive artistic soul reacted deplorably, in terms of begrudged civility at best, and at other times of stubborn Celtic oppugnancy.

Dilatory tactics in directing had become too fast a habit with Nolan to be broken at will, and had forced him to forego his chance at that attractive job in the East. For which, of course, he would never forgive Lucinda. And he was otherwise so fed up with the feeling that he was unappreciated, that he had taken to fuming nastily over every set-back which put off the final "take" by so much as an hour, and indeed was more than once only restrained from "walking off the lot and leaving the picture flat" by the consideration that he had as yet been able to wheedle out of Lontaine a mere niggardly half of his contract fee in advance.

Aware of what was in the air, the supporting players held their collective breath against that explosion which all felt was due at any moment to hoist them into the same element and leave them there, belike, in indefinite suspense. Individually they went with a nice if naïve diplomacy in all their dealings with Miss Lee and Mr. Nolan individually; for who could foresay whose hands would hold the symbols of power when the dust had settled? But the sympathies of the producing staffs, to a

man, Lucinda was sensible, were with Nolan; and though this nettled her at times, she consoled herself with the reflection that it was after all only natural, since the best directors, that is to say those with the most artful and resourceful press-agents, hand-pick their lieutenants as a general custom and carry them along as they lightly flit from berth to berth. And she derived a little comfort from the belief that the cameraman was on her side.

Cameramen, being highly trained specialists in an exacting art, are more often than not men of independent minds, iconoclastic in their attitude toward the directors with whom they work. Iturbide was of this tribe. He knew his trade, not Nolan or any other could instruct him in it. If he reckoned the light not right for any take, that scene would wait though Nolan raved and the heavens quaked. In the choice of the right angle for any shot his judgment was final, even Nolan learned in time not to dispute it. And he accomplished his will with a singular economy of words and emotion, the more remarkable in view of the mercurial temper with which tradition accredits the race from whom he sprang. He was Mexican, a tall and rangey body, with eyes as beautiful as a woman's, and much to the silken courtesy of the Spanish whose blood he shared. "No, Mr. Nolan," he would announce in a strongly accented and resonant voice, shaking his head sorrowfully after setting up his camera and assaying the light by peering through a strip of negative film exposed behind the lens—"no, I no take—light no good. Tomorrow we take, maybe light better then." And while Nolan, who as like as not had voluptuously kept a regiment of extra people waiting all day to work in this the last hour of the afternoon—while Nolan spluttered and swore and offered to go down on his knees if prayers would move Iturbide to change his mind, the cameraman would be placidly superintending the demounting of his camera, and pocketing the darling lens whose care he never would trust to hands other than his own. And that scene would

not be taken until the next day—not then, if the light were not exactly to Iturbide's liking. Which was one among a number of reasons why his photography was credited with having saved many a picture otherwise without virtue.

Scrupulous always to avoid giving unprovoked offense, in the series of skirmishes which made the final two weeks of Nolan's engagement memorable, Iturbide played the part of benevolent neutral; but if Lucinda were not mistaken in her reading of his eyes, the best of his benevolence was reserved for her.

Historically—and setting aside minor clashes of opinion as mere affairs of outposts—the private war progressed to its conclusion in three stages, which for convenience may be named the Battle of the Supper Club Set, the Affair of the Comedy Feet, and the Last Stand in the Living-Room Doorway.

In the novel from which the picture in production took its name and little else, most of the plot development was worked out in a fashionable supper club, where Lucinda in the character of a professional dancer, figured nightly as what for some reason New York that stays up nights knows by the name of "hostess." The rooms of the club as described bore close resemblance to the premises for years tenanted by the Club de Vingt in East Fifty-eighth street, to whose general plan, however, fanciful embellishments had been added in an effort to make it a frame worthy of the dancer's charms.

Over the lay-out, or scheme, for this set, Lucinda had spent many hours and much thought—before Nolan found time to give the production any attention whatever—in consultation with Harry Lontaine and Mr. Coakley, the talented young man who served the Zinn Studios in the capacity of general technical director: an office which as organized by the motion-picture trade, comprehends those—among others—of architect, landscape-gardener, scene, house, sign and artist-painter, interior decorator,

and amateur of the art of every era, from the Eolithic to that of East Aurora. And in the end Lucinda had turned to her work before the camera well-satisfied that Mr. Coakley knew what to do and how to do it, and would assemble an excellently suitable room if left to exercise his own good taste and ingenuity.

The most pretentious bit of building required by the production, the supper club was the last to be erected, and wasn't ready till the beginning of the fourth week of Nolan's reign; as Lucinda learned it was, one evening, when the assistant-director circulated a call for the entire company to work on it the next day.

Accordingly, Lucinda and Fanny strolled over to the main stage, where, behind a flimsy fence of sides—frames of wood and paint-smeared canvas held up by struts—the precincts of the supper-club basked in the cynical glare of Cooper-Hewitts overhead.

Inside the barricade, Lucinda halted with a cry of shocked remonstrance.

In the middle of the floor, upon which she was to give the solo dance which she had been weeks rehearsing under a veteran professional, Nolan stood vivaciously lining out tomorrow's proposed campaign for the benefit of a group composed of his first assistant, Mr. Wells, Iturbide and the second cameraman, and Mr. Coakley.

There was nothing else to break the full force of the blow which fate had prepared for Lucinda's expectations.

Of the gay, exquisite scheme upon which she and Coakley had agreed, guided by the novel, there wasn't a sign. The main masses of woodwork were here all a dull, blank black. The panels, which were to have framed baskets of fruit and garlands of flowers, in low polychrome relief-work, had yielded place to paintings in the style of French posters, of women in antic postures and clothed only enough to accent their nakedness. The little tables that lined the walls were dressed with cloths checquered staringly in red and white. The imbecile geom-

etry of the Cubists had patterned all the draperies and upholstery materials in weird juxtapositions of colour apparently intended to give away the grisly cosmic secret that there was something rotten in the solar spectrum. And at the far end of the room there was . . . Lucinda looked twice to make sure her eyes did not deceive her. But, no; there it was: a bar, a veritable zinc of the common Parisian cabaret.

And while she gaped aghast, hysterically torn by a desire to scream with lunatic laughter and an impulse to weep and dance with rage, Nolan spied her and, deserting his audience, tripped briskly over, beaming happily.

"Well, Miss Lee! how about it, eh? A little slice off the top of the real Bohemia, I'll tell the world. And wait till you see how she screens. O bay-bee! but this glad young set's gonna photograph like a million dollars."

Lucinda choked down the anger with which her lips were tremulous. For an instant she stared hopelessly at Nolan, comprehending that this vile parody of the design she had approved was due wholly to his arbitrary action in contradicting the plans without reference to her wishes. And she could have cried with disappointment and vexation. As a matter of simple fact, her eyes did fill in that bitter moment when she was made poignantly aware of how high her hopes had been and how heartlessly frustrated, and how helpless she was to express a tithe of her indignation without jeopardizing the good of the picture.

If she spoke her mind it were inconceivable that Nolan should consent to continue as director. And grave and well-grounded as was her dissatisfaction with him, Lucinda was not yet ready to believe it would benefit the picture to have it finished by another intelligence than that under whose guidance it had been so ill-begun.

And it is by this that the potential artistic stature of Linda Lee is to be reckoned, that in this the young beginning of her career she had already learned, what many

who walk with the great ones of the screen have never learned and are incapable of learning, to think of her work before herself, to esteem her rôle as something less than the story which gave it excuse for being, to hold the welfare of the picture as a picture more important than her own.

While still she faltered, fearing to speak her mind, Coakley came up with the others. To him she turned reproachfully.

"Oh, Mr. Coakley! *why* did you do this?"

Before Coakley could reply Nolan cut in irritably: "Do what? What's the matter now?"

"I'm asking Mr. Coakley why he didn't carry out the design we agreed on for the supper club."

Coakley grinned and scratched an ear. "Mr. Nolan's ideas, Miss Lee," he drawled uncomfortably.

"Mr. Nolan ordered this change?"

Nolan brusquely interposed: "Of course, I did. What's wrong with the set?"

"And you didn't consult me, Mr. Coakley?"

"I supposed you knew, Miss Lee."

"Say, listen here!" Nolan snapped—"what's the grand idea? I said I was responsible for this set, didn't I? I gave Coakley's lay-out the once-over, saw it wouldn't do, and told him what I wanted. And why wouldn't I? Look't what we got. Not much like that glorified tea-room you were satisfied with, is it?"

"No, Mr. Nolan—not much. I grant you that."

"Well, then, what's the big objection?"

"Simply that the set is out of harmony with the rest of the picture——"

"Out of harmony! Why, it's going to *make* the picture! You ask Harry Iturbide here. He'll tell you, when that set's flashed on the screen it's going to knock your eye out."

"I'm sure he will," Lucinda agreed, smiling at the cameraman.

"Well, Harry?" Nolan insisted—"what about it? Who's got the rights of this argument?"

"Miss Lee," the cameraman said, sententious.

"Miss Lee has! Say: how do you make that out?"

"You don't want to make your background too prominent, Mr. Nolan," Iturbide explained patiently. "This set is going to stick out in front of the actors. You won't be able to see what they're doing against a checker-board like that."

"Ah, you give me a pain!" Nolan retorted crushingly. "That background's all right—going to photograph like a million dollars, I tell you."

"But, Mr. Nolan," Lucinda resumed with more confidence: "don't you see that the set is completely out of key with the atmosphere of the story? It isn't in the least like the supper club the author described."

"Bet your sweet life it isn't! Look here: I read that story, and I know all about it, and I can show you where the author was all wrong with his idea of the kind of a joint *Nelly* was running——"

"It wasn't what you call a 'joint,' to begin with, Mr. Nolan."

"That's just the very point I'm trying to make. If it isn't a joint you're dancing in, where's *Richards* get off with his kicking about you not being good enough to marry his son? It's got to be a joint, or there won't be any sense in the way he fusses when he finds out you and *Dick* are stepping out together. If that place in the book wasn't a joint, I'm a kike!" Nolan paused in triumph to let his argument sink in. "Now"—he brandished a hand at the set—"this *is* a joint, and a regular one, if you want to know. Some class to this. I doped it all out myself. Take those tablecloths, now: that's the identical kind they were using in Montmartre last time I was in New York. And those panels on the walls—I got the idea for them from Reisenweber's Paradise Room, only these are sportier. And that black woodwork and all . . .

Why, we've taken the best points of all the classiest joints in New York and lumped them into one set, and improved on them at that. Now when this poor fish of a *Richards* sees his son dancing with you in a joint like this, he'll have some excuse for claiming you ain't all you might be."

"The trouble is," Lucinda replied gravely—"I mean, from your viewpoint the trouble will be—*Richards* will never see *Dick* dancing with me in this set."

"What's the reason he won't?"

Lucinda smiled slightly, shook her head slightly, slightly shrugged. In the course of Nolan's harangue it had been revealed to her that no greater calamity could possibly be visited upon the picture than to permit its essential colour of good taste to be vitiated by the introduction of this purely atrocious set. It would be like asking the public to believe that people accustomed to sup and dance in the Crystal Room at the Ritz had transferred their favour to the roughest cabaret in the purlieus of Longacre Square.

"What's the reason he won't?" Nolan repeated, raising his voice angrily.

"Because I won't work on this set, Mr. Nolan—until it is restored to the design I approved."

"But—my Gawd!—you can't do that, Miss Lee—you can't hold up this production like that. Why, it'll take weeks——"

"How long will it take, please, Mr. Coakley?"

"Well, I don't know, Miss Lee—I might be able to rush it through for you in a week or ten days."

"There!" Nolan obtruded an excited smirk and weaving hands between Lucinda and the technical director. "You hear what Coakley says. Ten days! You can't hold up this production ten days, Miss Lee."

"I can," Lucinda corrected coldly, "and will, no matter how long it takes to make this set resemble a place self-respecting people would patronize."

"But— listen here!—you can't go to work and upset all

my plans at the last moment, like this. Company called for half-past eight—fifty extra people hired for four days' work—orchestra from the Alexandria and all—the best caterer in Los Angeles engaged to serve the eats—! You can't throw me down like this——"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Nolan. You should have consulted me before ordering such changes on your own responsibility——"

"Look here: am I directing this picture, or ain't I?"

"I'll answer that question when you answer mine: Am I paying for this production or are you? And if I am, are you the only one whose wishes are to be considered?"

"Listen, now, Miss Lee." Nolan made a frantic effort to be calm and urbane. He swallowed hard. "Listen: I don't want to have any trouble with you, but you're making it all-fired hard for me. I've been in this business ever since there was a studio in Hollywood, I've directed hundreds of productions, hundreds of 'em, I ought to know my business——"

"It was on that assumption precisely that you were hired," Lucinda reminded him sweetly.

"But ever since I been working with you, I've felt—you've made me feel—damn it! you've been watching me and thinking sarcastic things about the way I do——"

"Did you never before suspect you were psychic, Mr. Nolan?"

"And now you openly criticize my judgment about this set and say you won't work on it——"

"You understand me exactly," Lucinda assented.

"You mean that?"

She nodded.

"Well, that—settles—it!" Nolan flung both hands above his head and waggled them insanely. "That *settles* it! I'm through—I'm finished—done! I'm out! I quit!"

He hesitated a single instant, searching Lucinda's face to see it blench at this awful threat; and in disappointment whirled on a heel and barged out of the set so blindly

that he blundered into one of the frames and knocked it flat.

Lucinda nodded quietly to the technical man.

"Please make the changes as soon as you can, Mr. Coakley. It's all right: don't apologize any more. I quite understand it wasn't your fault."

The president of Linda Lee Inc. wasn't in his office, neither was his car in the parking yard; but Nolan evidently knew where to find him, for Lucinda had not been twenty minutes in her rooms at the Hollywood when Lontaine's knuckles rattled on the door. His agitation, when she admitted him, was intense, almost pitiable. One gathered that he considered a tiff between star and director a catastrophe second only to national censorship of pictures. He stammered painfully over his account of Nolan's ultimatum, which had been accompanied by a demand for the balance of his pay in full and at once.

"I presume you haven't heard from your lawyer yet, Linda . . . "

"He hasn't had time to get my letter."

"I don't suppose—you couldn't wire him now? It would give us a frightful black eye if Nolan were able to say we couldn't pay him."

"But he's had twelve thousand or so already. Why should he get the balance of his fee if he refuses to earn it?"

"But he claims you as good as fired him——"

"No doubt he would." Lucinda corrected to the last letter that misstatement of fact. . . . "So you see, the truth is, Mr. Nolan fired himself in a pet because I refused to let him ruin the supper club sequences. Now if he wants the rest of his twenty-five thousand, he'll have to hire himself on again."

And eventually despairing of a change of heart in Lucinda, Lontaine took himself off to test his powers of moral or other suasion on Nolan; and at intervals during the evening called up to report progress, or rather that

absence of progress which rewarded his best endeavours. Hope died hard in him, however; and some time after midnight the telephone routed Lucinda out of her bed to receive a somewhat disconnected communiqué to the effect that Lontaine's cunning as a diplomat had at length wrung from Nolan a promise to return to work the next day.

Strains of jazz which filtered over the wire, a singing background for the muzzy accents which retailed this glorious news, led Lucinda to infer that Lontaine was calling from Santa Monica, and to suspect that Nolan's capitulation had been to some extent at least due to the humanizing, at times, influences of the stuff the genial bootlegger vends; but perhaps no more than to the intoxicating kindness of Fanny's eyes . . .

To her taste the Affair of the Comedy Feet was something more farcical, though Nolan did take it in a depressing spirit of deadly seriousness.

In fact, one of the heaviest handicaps under which this young man laboured in his progress through life was a tendency to take frivolous matters, including himself, a shade over-seriously; a fault he shared with so many of his fellows of the studios that Zinn one day was moved to comment on its cause, not without psychological insight.

"One of the big troubles with the fillum business," he observed sagely, "is the way it's made a lot of people rich what wasn't never meant to be that way. And take it from me, pictures ain't never going to be right, really, until most of that bunch gets out of the business or gets over their surprise.

"Independence," he mused, "is one of the dangerousest weapons a person can put in the hands of an ignorant guy."

Next to himself and his amours, the thing Barry Nolan took most seriously was Comedy, so much so that he clothed the word with the capital even in his private meditations, and devoted a good part of his professional

life to perspiring efforts to interject Comedy into the pictures he directed, especially those in whose composition Comedy, as he conceived it, had no business to find place.

Thus with the picture upon which his genius was at present engaged. Over the unfolding of its story the Comic Spirit did indeed preside, but manifested only in the rustle of its satiric wings, in a whisper of wit ever and anon animating the speech of its creatures; never in the head-on collision of two actors trying to pass through one doorway in opposite directions, never in the capers of a cross-eyed comedian dogged to his undoing by a pack of wild pies. So that Nolan felt it devolved upon him to save the picture by distorting situations integral in its plot and by devising others for interpolation, to the end that Comedy, the Comedy of the cinema, of physical mishaps and deformities, might mow and bow upon the screen its bid for guffaws.

If the results he gained were often lamentable, Lucinda ceased to offer comment when her first diffident strictures had been ungraciously overruled. It would be time enough to fight for a decision, she reflected, when the picture was ultimately cut to length and assembled; in which process much of this deplorable stuff would be sure to go by the board, for very lack of space.

Piqued to find her so unresponsive, Nolan issued secret orders that his most ambitious comic flights were not to be shown Lucinda with the other rushes, and confined further efforts in the vein to scenes in which she took no part.

And it was thus that the Comedy Feet crept up on her unawares.

Some time subsequent to the Battle of the Supper Club Set, when his equanimity seemed to have been completely restored, Nolan acquainted Lucinda with the details of an utterly unique method of screen introduction which he had invented, all out of his own head, with a view to lending distinction to her début.

By this device the public was first to make her acquaintance through the medium of a close-up framing two pair of dancing feet, *Nelly's* (that is to say, Lucinda's) and her professional partner's. Then, as these rested, the partner's feet were to be eliminated, and the close-up, after lingering one fond, reluctant moment on Lucinda's ankles, was to travel up her person until it hovered upon her head and shoulders.

If not strikingly novel, the business seemed simple and innocuous enough to Lucinda, and she posed for it according to instructions and without misgiving.

But when, the next day, she sat with Nolan in the projection-room, reviewing the rushes, this is what the screen revealed to her astounded eyes:

She saw first a stripling fashionable, an admirer of hers in the story, stroll down a section of sidewalk in the Los Angeles shopping district (which Nolan asserted was "Fifth Avenue to a T") enter a florist's shop, select roses, and scribble a card to accompany them, while the florist summoned an errand boy, a repulsive white slug of a child, eight or nine years of age, heavy with unwholesome fat and wearing an habitual look of hopeless vacuity, whom Lucinda had several times noticed, not without wonder, as he loitered drearily about the stage.

As she now saw him, the boy had been heartlessly shoehorned into the brass-bound livery of a page, and wore upon his feet a brace of leathern wrecks which even the broad charity of a Charlie Chaplin would have hesitated to call shoes.

Waiting for the card to be written, this bleached sausage of a child restlessly shuffled his tragic feet, and again and again wiped them on each other. To make sure that nothing of the fine Comedy of the business would be overlooked, the feet were isolated in an heroic close-up.

She saw the boy take the box of roses and leave the shop to deliver them. As he emerged to the street the fiendish camera pounced upon his feet and again held

them up to derision in a close-up wherein they resembled more than anything else abnormal vegetable growths uncannily animate. Nor was this enough. With the savage elemental humour of a Yahoo the camera hounded those fungoid feet as they clumped and dragged and faltered along the sidewalk, their monstrosity painfully stressed by contrast with the trim legs and dainty feet of feminine passers-by, the decently shod feet of men.

When unstinted quantities of film had been squandered in this delectable pursuit, the Comedy Feet were shown performing a side-splitting stumble over the threshold to the supper club establishment.

The close-up of Lucinda's feet with her dancing partner's was then disclosed; and the camera shifted its intimate attentions to another pair of feet disgracefully clad, which were discovered in the act of pressing the pedals of a piano and appeared to belong to a low comedy stage mother whom Nolan had foisted upon Lucinda in his version of the continuity. These last the camera followed as they left the piano and shuffled across the floor to meet the feet of the errand-boy, then as they crossed to halt near the feet of Lucinda.

Followed the ascent of the close-up to frame on Lucinda's face as she smiled down at her armful of roses.

The film ran out then, darkness fell, the ceiling light came on, and Nolan, who had the chair immediately in front of Lucinda's, twisted round with a bright, expectant grin to study her face for the glow of glad appreciation which he felt his ingenuity had earned.

She managed a wan little smile for him, but her eyes held still a look of bewilderment too deep to be readily erased, too despairing to be misread. Nolan flushed, but wasn't ready to admit defeat.

"I'll tell the world," he declared defiantly, "the screen never seen an introduction like that before!"

Anxious to avoid a repetition of their former squabble, Lucinda sought vainly for some equivocal phrase that

would content the man's stupendous vanity. But, inconceivably inane as it sounds, the business of the Comedy Feet has been here set forth without the faintest colour of exaggeration; and her wits were numb from the impact of its wanton stupidity.

"Well!" Nolan sneered in an effort to reassert his authority—"I can see it didn't make a whale of a hit with you, Miss Lee, but believe me, the audiences will eat that stuff up, simply eat it up!"

"Don't you think," Lucinda ventured—"perhaps it's a little long, Mr. Nolan?"

"Oh, maybe a little trimming here and there won't do any harm. But it can't come down a whole lot without hurting the Comedy effect."

"But—I don't like to seem hypercritical—but that's what's troubling me. You see, it doesn't seem terribly amusing to me."

Nolan's eyes snapped, but as yet he had his temper under fair control.

"I'd like to know why not," he replied with more civility than the bare words as quoted can convey.

"If you'll be patient with me, I'll try to explain. It seems to me in a story of this sort, about real people struggling with real emotions, whatever comedy is introduced ought to be in character or consistent with the general tone of the picture."

"Well?" Nolan drawled wearily.

"Well—assuming there's really something funny about that child's pitiful feet—it's utterly at odds with probability to place him, dressed as he is, in the shop of a Fifth avenue florist. No such establishment would dream of employing such a caricature of an errand boy . . . Don't you see?"

"No," Nolan replied with an offensive echo of her inflection—"no, I don't *see*. It's Comedy, audiences are always howling for Comedy, and if anything on God's green

earth can save this rotten picture it'll be the Comedy I'm sticking into it."

"Then I'm afraid it's hopeless."

"But I'll tell you what I do see." Nolan leaned over the back of his chair and grinned mirthlessly into Lucinda's face. "I see what I've seen all along, and that is there's no pleasing you, Miss Lee! Ever since I started on this picture you've had the old harpoon out for everything I did, and this, what you're saying today about this introduction I invented for you, is all of a piece with the way you've been acting all along."

"But, please, Mr. Nolan!"—Lucinda was trying her best to be temperate—"surely this isn't a reasonable attitude to take, surely you can make allowances for honest difference of opinion."

"Ah, it ain't your fault!" Nolan jerked angrily out of his chair and turned to the door, but delayed long enough to deliver a valedictory: "And I'm a sap to let anybody that knows as little about pictures get my goat like you do. Have it your own way—chuck the whole sequence out, if you don't like this introduction I framed special for you. It's your picture, I should worry what the piece of junk looks like when you're through with it. But I tell you one thing: If that introduction don't stand, my name can't go on the picture as its director. And that's flat, my lady!"

And before Lucinda could take advantage of this wide invitation to a withering retort, the door slammed on Nolan's impassioned exit.

XXXV

THE day of the Last Stand in the Living-Room Doorway began auspiciously enough with receipt of a night-letter from Harford Willis stating that money matters had been arranged in conformance with Lucinda's wishes, and adding that Willis hoped before long to give himself the pleasure of calling on her in person; the business of another client was requiring his supervision in San Francisco, on the way out he could readily stop over in Los Angeles for a day or two, he was leaving New York the day he telegraphed.

Not a little to her own wonder, Lucinda found herself pleasantly excited by the thought that she was to see this old friend so soon again. Had his telegram come a week or so earlier, she must have been quite as much annoyed, have deemed its implicit promise of meddling in her affairs an inexcusable impertinence. But a week or so ago, at least up to the time of Bellamy's reappearance, she had been comparatively serene, smug with self-contentment because of the semblance of success which had thus far attended the rather off-hand measures she had adopted in dealing with the larger issues of her life. Now, however, she knew no more peace of mind, in the last fortnight the pressure of perplexities had grown so heavy that she found herself eagerly looking forward to the arrival of one in whom she could confide, of whom she could ask counsel, without fearing to hear self-interest sound in his responses.

Harford Willis might disapprove the roads she chose to go, but so long as she kept within certain bounds, which she herself would never dream of overstepping, he

wouldn't censure; and if she found the going rough in the ways of wilfulness, his sympathy would none the less be constant, he'd never say, "I told you so;" and never would he be guilty of advising any course of action to the end that he himself might profit. Take him for what he was, there was nobody like him, nobody else whom she could so trust . . . not even Lynn . . .

Not even Lynn! A bitter thought to have to think, but a true, and one it were not the part of wisdom to ignore, that she couldn't look to the man she loved with all her heart, and who loved her well in his way, she knew, for sympathy in her trials and for unselfish advice, as she could to another in whose consideration she was merely a pretty, headstrong girl whom he had known since she was little, the daughter of an old friend.

For the truth was (idle to deny it longer or hope against hope that one might be mistaken) Lynn was changed, had ceased to be the light-hearted and irresponsible but tender lover of the days before Bellamy had come back to play skeleton at their feast, of late had grown irritable in a fashion new to Lucinda's knowledge of him, somewhat sulky and suspicious of temper, impatient of Lucinda's troubles when she wanted condolence and soothing, and over-ready to remind her he had troubles of his own.

She wasn't disposed to quarrel with him on that account, she was too fair-minded to deny him his grievances or the right to nurse them. Surely the situation in which Lynn now newly found himself was one to play the deuce with the sunniest of dispositions—to be an accepted lover and have a husband continually if with pretended playfulness snapping at one's heels, or else circling watchfully in the not too remote distance and showing his teeth, every time one looked his way, in a grin as malicious as it was brilliant.

Then there was that trouble with Lynn's foot, something that had turned out, rather to Lucinda's astonishment,

to be a real injury, no make-believe feigned for an occasion. At the studio second-hand accounts came to her, of how Summerlad's foot had slipped, while he was doing "river stuff," and had been severely pinched between two logs. It hadn't seemed much of a hurt at the time, and Summerlad had made light of it, just as today he made light of it; but it had been slow to mend, and even now, though he usually managed to get through his work for the camera without registering the injury, there were days when he walked with a noticeable limp, when inability to get about with comfort interfered seriously with the amusements he had been accustomed to share with Lucinda.

So she wasn't seeing so much of him as aforetime, and when she did, what with natural preoccupation in their respective afflictions, to say nothing of the greater annoyance that afflicted them in common, the old unconstraint was grievously missed.

But nothing in this life lasts (Lucinda insisted on iterating, in a temper doggedly philosophic) and even as that earlier time of ecstasies had passed, this time of trial would pass, the day would come when, her picture finished, she would be free to leave the studio and forget Bellamy's existence, go on to Reno and get her freedom, when Lynn would be hers alone and they two could look back at this time and laugh to think how it had galled them.

Busy with such reflections, and with the pleasing prospect of soon having a willing audience for her complaints, Lucinda made nothing of the fact that Lontaine showed the whites of his eyes and shied back like a skittish cob from the telegram which she submitted to his inspection, and was even not much tranquillized by the cheque which, at the same time, she gave him for the replenishment of the company's coffers. And in her most amiable temper she hurried from his office to her dressing-room, into the newest, prettiest and most becoming dance frock she had

ever owned, who had owned so many, and then out to the stage.

The company was waiting, the cameras were waiting, Nolan with an air of noblest patience was waiting. All of which was quite needless, for there was other work in abundance that could have been attended to, there were scenes in the same sequence in which she didn't appear and which might easily have been rehearsed if not photographed even though Lucinda was a bit tardy. But that wouldn't have suited Nolan's little book: having told Lucinda when he would want her at a fixed hour, he was determined that nothing should go forward till she showed up. That wasn't the Nolan method in dealing with women, to let them play fast and loose with his mandates and pretend it didn't matter. Was he not Barry Nolan, well-known for his success in taming temperamental actresses? A reputation honestly earned and of which he proposed that Lucinda should now be reminded in no uncertain accents. And if one had ventured to question his policy, he would have pointed out that company morale was bound to suffer if the director neglected to "go to the mat with" his star every so often. The success of every human undertaking depended on undisputed authority vesting in one and only one directing head—in moving-pictures, the director's. A lesson every star needed to be taught upon occasion. You had to keep hammering it into the poor dumb-bells, or they got the swelled head—and then where were you?

In point of sober fact, Nolan was enjoying himself tremendously, though to have admitted as much, even to his private conscience, would have spoiled the fun entirely. He couldn't possibly have been having such a good time if he hadn't been in such a vile temper.

Up to the moment of Lucinda's appearance, he had been whiling away the Wait by delivering a monologue of spontaneous generation, a discourse having for its subject the habits of stars in general and of self-made feminine

stars in especial, studiously impersonal in phrasing but mordant of wit, and delivered with an air of gentle and melancholy detachment which took no perceptible account of the snickerings of his henchmen and the ill-hidden smiles of actors who, in the absence of Lucinda, were hazarding no guesses as to which side their bread was buttered on.

As Lucinda drew near, Nolan hoisted himself out of the basket-chair in which he had been lounging, with something more than a suggestion of limbs cramped by prolonged inactivity, and bowed politely, too politely.

But Lucinda was feeling much too kindly minded toward all the world, that morning, to resent his nonsense, though by no means unaware of its cause and aim. And with every intention of keeping the peace she returned a brief but good-natured nod and smile.

"Sorry if I've kept you waiting, Mr. Nolan, but I had some business with Mr. Lontaine we couldn't put off."

"No matter at all, Miss Lee, I assure you—no matter a-tall! My time is yours, the company's time is yours, all the time there *is* is yours, to use or waste, just as you think best."

Lucinda couldn't very well let offensiveness so pointed pass without comment. She stopped, turned squarely to face Nolan, with a keen smile, looked him deliberately up and down, a movement of shoulders summing up clearly enough the substance of her impressions.

"Thank you for telling me," she said sweetly. "And now *that* is understood, suppose we try to make up for the time I've wasted, if possible, by getting to work at once . . . "

The only retort that occurred to Nolan as at all appropriate he felt instinctively to be inadequate in point of elegance; so he judiciously refrained from uttering it. And anyhow, the day was young yet, his hour would come.

"Fair enough," he agreed with a passable display of

good spirit. "Le's go to it, then." He approached the set on which two cameras stood trained at close range, with Klieg lights focussed. "Now, Miss Lee, I'll just line in what I want of you this scene."

The set was a simple angle, where two walls met in an apartment hallway, with a door that opened inward from a living-room set beyond. In this last the big dramatic moment of the play was to be staged, a scene involving Lucinda and her two leading-men, the heavy father and the juvenile, his son, both of whom were understood to be in love with *Nelly*.

Here, in his bachelor apartment, *Nelly* was to call at midnight on the father, seeking him without care for appearances in an hour of desperation, to beg him to intervene with the villain of the piece and save her wayward brother from imprisonment on a charge of theft.

The madly infatuated father was to take this opportunity to propose marriage, and *Nelly* was to accept him, momentarily carried off her feet by the sincerity of his passion as much as by the glamour of his wealth and social position.

While this was going on, *Dick,* the son, passing in the street, was to catch a glimpse of *Nelly's* shadow on the window-shade and, wild with jealousy, demand admittance. The father, divining his son's suspicions and desiring to allay them, furthermore at a loss for a fair excuse for refusing to see the boy, was to conduct *Nelly* to the private hallway and leave here there with the understanding that, while he was letting *Dick* in at the front door, she was to slip away by the back.

Instead of doing so, *Nelly* was to linger behind the door and overhear the quarrel between father and son, in the course of which it was to transpire that the former had once offered to wager the latter that he could make the girl his mistress within a given period of time. Whereupon, in revulsion of feeling, *Nelly* was to confront the two and, while confessing she had planned deliberately to

marry either one or the other of them for his money, assert herself to be too good to be the wife of either.

It is illustrative of the topsy-turvey methods of cinema production that no part of this sequence had as yet been photographed except the scenes in the street when *Dick*, passing on the way home to his own bachelor quarters, looked up and espied Lucinda's shadow; and that Lucinda was now to enact the scene at the doorway before taking part in the living-room scenes which in the photoplay would precede and follow it.

The angle had been set up directly adjoining the living-room set, in order that the door, when *Nelly* opened it to denounce father and son, might reveal a glimpse of that interior with the two men standing thunderstruck.

Nolan proceeded now to act out in his own person the business which he conceived to be in character for a girl of *Nelly's* quality in circumstances so contrived as to make voluntary eavesdropping on her part seem constructively defensible. And Lucinda looked on with earnest attention and puckered brows, eager to catch every hint that would help her become a better actress. Her distrust of Nolan extended only to his abilities as a constructive builder of story-telling pictures and a judge of pictorial values. For the very considerable amount of raw power as a pantomime which he indubitably possessed, she had much respect. Prior to invading the realm of motion-pictures, Nolan had served long and arduous apprenticeship as a general utility actor in stock companies of the Middle West and the Pacific Coast. He knew every trick of gesture and expression and how to communicate the secret of their most effective use in the delineation of theatrical as distinguished from real emotion. In this respect his greatest fault was a tendency to overdo things, to let enthusiasm for acting run away with discrimination.

This enthusiasm was running away with him now, he was building the solo scene which Lucinda was to play

on lines of broad emotional melodrama widely inconsistent with the situation. Forgetting that, while the conversation assumed to be going on beyond the door was one well calculated to annoy and disgust her whom it concerned, its revelations were after all hardly of a character to break her heart, who was in love with neither of the speakers—indifferent to these considerations, Nolan was, as *Nelly,* ranting and raving in the angle like one gone half-mad with shock and grief. Yet such was the fire he infused into the performance that for the time being he truly succeeded in perverting Lucinda's grasp of the scene, and won her admiration in spite of her latent dislike. So that when, having exhausted his repertoire of emotional artifice, he stepped out of the camera lines, consulting Lucinda with a glance and the stereotyped enquiry, "See what I want, dear?" she replied without thinking—"You mak it most real. I'll do my best"—and stepped into character and the set as the lights blazed on, the cameras began to tick, and Nolan seized his baton of authority, the megaphone which he invariably used while directing, though he had as much need of it now as the cameras had of telescopic lenses.

"Now, dear," he blared through this instrument—"go to it and show us all you've got. Don't be afraid of letting yourself go. Remember, this is your Big Scene, biggest you've got in this story, your one grand little chance to put it over that you're a sure-enough actress . . . That's it"—the elderly leading-man ushered Lucinda into the set from the living-room side, laid a finger to his lips, and pointed down the hallway before disappearing—"that's it—nod to show you know what he means. Now you start for the back door. You haven't thought yet it would be a swell idea to stop and listen to all they're saying about you. But now you do, now you hesitate, turn, look back at the door, frowning. Pretty work. Now go back, but not all at once. Make us see you don't think you ought to do this sort of thing, make us see

the big struggle with your better nature, and better nature losing out. Good. Now you put your ear to the crack in the door and hear your name. Give a big start and look horrified. You never dreamed men could talk about women like that, you know, you wouldn't have believed *Richards* and *Dick* could talk that way about you. Show us horror, dear, and make it strong, you can't make it too strong. Remember: you're just realizing the man you love is such a rotten cad he could make a bet about your virtue. It just makes you feel sick all over——!

"Great snakes! what's *that* for? What's the matter?"

For of a sudden Lucinda laughed outright, suddenly the heartrending tremolo of Nolan's voice as he detailed the awful offense Richards had committed against *Nelly* in the play tickled irresistibly her sense of the absurd; and her laugh followed naturally, inevitably, uncontrollably.

Now as Nolan with a frantic wave bade the cameraman cease cranking, she made a sign of helpless appeal and, inarticulate with mirth, rested weakly against the door and held her sides.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Nolan," she gasped. "Forgive me, I—I didn't know I was going to laugh till—till—till it struck me as so funny——!"

Her voice rose and broke in another peal of hysterical merriment, her words became unintelligible, while Nolan literally ground his teeth.

"*What* struck you as so funny?" he exploded. "Show me anything funny about this scene and I—I'll eat my megaphone. What's so damn' funny?"

"Oh, I am sorry!" Lucinda was doing her utmost to sober herself, but still her voice shook and her body rocked with recurrent spasms of idiotic mirth. "You see—when you said that—what you said about *Richards* being a rotter—all at once it struck me—I'm sure I don't know why—as funny, too awfully funny for words!"

"Well, why?" Nolan insisted, all but dancing with rage. "Hell! Give me a reason. Why's it funny?"

"Because—well, you see—I don't like to criticize, you resent my suggestions so—but really, you know, this is a ridiculous way to expect *Nelly* to carry on when she hears what she hears. She isn't in love with *Richards,* she isn't even in love with *Dick;* and surely"—Lucinda was now rapidly growing serious in her anxiety to justify herself to Nolan's face of a thunderhead—"surely she oughtn't to go all to pieces just because she hears *Richards* confess, what she's known all along, that he's the sort of a man he is."

"Listen here: who's directing this scene, you'r me? Who wrote the continuity, you'r me? Who knows best what this story's all about, heh, you'r me?"

"But, Mr. Nolan, I'm sure, if you'll just think a moment you'll see it isn't natural for a girl like *Nelly* to rant like a tragedy queen over this situation. She'd be hurt, I grant you, and she'd be angry, angry with herself as much as with *Richards,* but she wouldn't tear around in this corner like a —like Lillian Gish in *Broken Blossoms* when's she's trapped in the scullery and her father's breaking in to murder her. Don't you see?"

"Sure I see." Nolan spoke with an unwonted evenness of tone, for him; but the tone was ugly. "I see a lot of things. I see you've made up your mind to try to make a fool of me, arguing about my visualization of this scene like you have. I see you're dead-set on making me so mad I'll give up my job rather than go on trying to make an actress out of screen-struck near-society dame. Well, all right, you *win.* I resign. I'm out. You've got your wish. And this time I don't come back, not if you was to go down on your knees to beg me to finish this fool picture!"

In an abrupt break of fury, oddly out of keeping with the level tone he had used, Nolan raised the megaphone

above his head and with all his might cast it upon the floor at Lucinda's feet.

"And that ends that," he announced quietly, and walked off, leaving Lucinda in a temper curiously divided between relief and regret. For this time, she was sure, Nolan meant it.

XXXVI

AT a late hour that afternoon the war council of the incorporators of Linda Lee Inc. stalled on dead centre.

Prolonged discussion had failed to suggest any means of salvaging the argosy of their fortunes from speedy foundering. No sort of success had rewarded the quest of a navigator at once competent and free to take command of the venture which Nolan had bungled and abandoned; so far as could be determined, there was none such at liberty. And when Lucinda had once more iterated her unshakable refusal to countenance overtures looking toward the reinstatement of Nolan, silence spellbound the four gathered together in that tiny, ill-furnished room which served Lontaine as an office, the silence of spiritual discouragement and mental enervation.

Fanny alone seemed quick with an elfin fire which enabled her to skim lightly the surface of that slough of despond in which the others were one and all so sadly bogged. Perched on the writing-bed of Lontaine's war-worn desk, she sat swinging pretty legs in the space between the pedestals, and smoking a cigarette, her abstracted but amused gaze roving out through the single window, the most elusive and illegible of smiles flickering about her paint-smeared lips.

Against an end of the desk leaned Iturbide—bidden to the conference because of his wide and intimate knowledge of directors—with hands plunged deep into trouser pockets, his oval face of olive tint wearing that sullen cast which in the Latin is so often indicative of nothing worse than simple thoughtfulness.

In a common chair tilted back against the opposite wall Lontaine sat absently worrying his scrubby moustache with an exquisitely manicured thumb and forefinger. His look, too, was sullen, but with the sullenness of fears aggravated by patience worn thin and threadbare. He had not said or suggested as much by syllable or glance, yet Lucinda felt that he held her solely responsible for the break with Nolan, and was weary of the whole business to boot, and heartily wished himself out of it. But she regarded him without sympathy if with little resentment: his suggestion and his insistence had first wrung from her a reluctant consent to try her luck in pictures, his mismanagement alone (who had plighted such brave work of his superior intelligence!) had been responsible for the engagement of Nolan; now it was for him to find some way out for them all.

But the most curious of her impressions concerning Lontaine was one that seemed absurdly unfair, yet one from which she could by no means divorce her imagination, a feeling at once unfixable and insistent, that at heart Lontaine didn't really care, that he was contemplating quite callously the threatened wreck of his fair hopes and fine promises, was more concerned with enigmatic premonitions of a nature wholly personal and selfish.

Lucinda herself occupied the desk-chair of the president. Profound weariness temporarily held her faculties in suspense. Her least formless thoughts were of the evening to come, when she and the Lontaines were to dine with Summerlad in Beverly Hills. She was deciding to be beforehand with Harry and Fanny, that she might have a little time alone with Lynn.

Relentless association of ideas stirred up thoughts of Bel, speculations as to whether he had heard as yet, and what he had said, or what he would say and think when he did hear. Nothing would please him more than to see her pretensions collapse like a house of cards. Well . . . her temper grew hard with defiance . . . he would

be disappointed if he counted on her heart faltering at this juncture. No matter how black the present outlook, she would go through to the end, be it sweet or as gall, and bow to the verdict of the public only, never to the blind bludgeonings of mischance.

For a little she pondered in mild puzzlement the riddle of Bel's relations with Nelly Marquis, recalling a scene that recently had been enacted by those two without their knowledge that she was near. A few nights since (last Tuesday, in fact; easy to date, because Lynn had attended the boxing-matches at Vernon, as he did every Tuesday, leaving Lucinda with an evening empty) she had been sitting alone on the veranda of the Hollywood, in a chair near the entrance but at the same time well back in the shadows, when Bel brought Nelly home at an hour indicating a late and leisurely dinner.

His car had swung up the drive to stop at the main entrance to the hotel, but neither Bel nor the girl made any move to alight. Unconscious of or else indifferent to observation, they had remained in the rear seat, pursuing a tense discussion, its nature unknown since only the confused rumour of their voices reached the ears of the onlooker; Bel forcing the argument, advocating Heaven-knew-what with a great deal of intensity, not much like his insouciance of everyday, while the girl, on her part, treated all his recommendations and prayers with an air of trifling, semi-coquettish, faintly derisive. But Bel's attitude wasn't in the least loverlike, more that of a man discharging a duty which he found distasteful but still couldn't bring himself to neglect, something that had to be attended to no matter how thankless . . .

The dispute continued for several minutes without appearing to get anywhere; and presently Bel leaned forward and spoke to his chauffeur round the side of the tonneau wind-shield, whereupon the car rolled out into the street and stopped again at the curb. Then Bel got down and helped Nelly out, and the two of them sauntered

up and down the sidewalk, now visible, now hidden by the fretted screen of subtropical growths, but always with their heads close together, always with Bel maintaining his air of almost passionate seriousness, and always with the girl lightly obstinate and teasing.

In odd contradiction to this impression of her, Lucinda set the memory of Nelly's face viewed at close quarters when, having parted with Bellamy, she hurried up the drive and into the hotel, passing without noticing Lucinda. Then the illumination from the lobby, escaping through the front door, had shown her countenance printed with the look of a damned soul hunted to its last gasp, a look to haunt one's dream with a sense of terror abject and unabated, of savage passions unappeased and unappeasable.

What all this had meant, Lucinda couldn't guess. Of one thing only she felt fairly confident: it hadn't been a lover's quarrel.

Curious that one's mind should revert to that memory, at a time when it ought by rights to be exclusively occupied with one's own, peculiar, and never more critical embarrassments . . .

Altogether without warning Lucinda found herself staring into the homely, greasy grin of Isadore Zinn.

The owner of the studios, without troubling to knock, had opened the door far enough to permit the introduction of his head and nothing more of his person. For a moment or two he held this posture playfully, looking from one to another of the unhappy four with a leer at once inquisitive, knowing, and hideous. Then he thrust the door wide open, came in, and shut it behind him.

"Hello, people!" he saluted affably. "How you making out?"

"Ah, that good Mr. Zinn!" Fanny airily replied. "If you really must know, we're not."

Iturbide stirred and shook his head, smiling gravely. "We talk and talk all day, Mr. Zinn," he said gently, "but

we don't get some place. You want to know why? Because there is no place for us to get."

"It's an impasse," Lontaine stated. Then remarking Zinn's nonplussed stare, he interpreted: "We're all in a blind alley, you know."

"Bet your life I know you are," Zinn agreed vigorously. "That's what I butted in to see you about. If I ain't in the way . . . " The four made reassuring noises. "I was thinking maybe they was something I might do to help out."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Zinn, thank you," Lucinda replied with regretful gratitude. "That is, unless you can find us a director."

"Funny. That's just what I was going to suggest." The instant stir of animation encouraged him to grin more abominably than ever. "Lay my hands on the very man you want inside five minutes; only they's one catch to it—he's under contract to somebody else."

"Then I don't quite see—" Lucinda began. But Lontaine interrupted: "You mean we can buy the fellow's contract, what?"

Zinn wagged his head. "Not a chanst," he uttered in lugubrious accents—"not a chanst. I wouldn't sell that boy's contract for no amount of money you'd want to name. Best little comer 't ever breathed hard into a megaphone, and I got him so's he'll eat out of my hand right now, and I'm going to get at least two good pictures out of him before I let him loose to get all ruined up by kind treatment. Wally Day's the lad I'm talking about. Got everything a guy ought to have to make a loud splash in pictures except the big-head, and he'll get that, too—all you got to do's give him time. Just now he's the only man I know could pull you out of the hole you've got yourselves into."

"But what's the use of tantalizing us?" Lucinda demanded fretfully—"if Mr. Day's services can't be begged, bought, or borrowed——"

"Well, I just got an idea maybe we could come to some sort of agreement about letting Wally finish up your picture. Like this, now: I been watching you people, the way you work, the way you been doing things, and seen a lot of your rushes, and I got an idea maybe I know how to make your picture right, maybe I and Wally could fix it up between us. Now listen: you've spent a bale of green money, I don't know how much, but a lot, maybe a couple hundred thousand dollars, maybe more. That's all right. We don't have to worry about that till I come to look at your books——"

"Look at our books!" Lontaine expostulated.

Zinn pacified him with a gross hand that patted the air. "Sure I got to look at your books, ain't I, if I sit in on this production? What I mean is like this: You sell me the production as is, story, continuity, Miss Lee's contract, all your properties 'n' everything, and I'll pay you fifty per cent what it cost you to date, cash money. Then I and Wally and Miss Lee here'll go ahead and finish up, and it won't cost you anything more, Miss Lee, and I'll give you ten per cent. the net profits. Meanwhile you"—he nodded to Lontaine—"can be fussing around and taking your time about finding a studio all your own and getting all set to use Miss Lee again when I and Wally are done with her. If that ain't a sporting offer, I don't know. What you say?"

Lucinda looked dubiously to Lontaine. His eyes had suddenly grown more stony and staring than she had ever seen them, and she fancied that he had lost a shade of colour; but he met her glance with a quick nod and said in a husky voice: "I agree with Mr. Zinn, Linda."

"You advise——!"

"I think he's made a very handsome offer. It—it's a clear and easy way out for us. You can't lose as much as you stand to under our present arrangements, assuming things shouldn't turn out as well as we've been hoping, and you may make some money. And, as he points out,

it will give us time to look around and make up our minds just what we want to do next. If I were you, I'd accept."

Lucinda delayed another moment, then turned to Zinn with a smile. "Very well, Mr. Zinn. If Mr. Lontaine's agreeable, I don't mind . . . "

"Fine business!" Zinn held out a mottled, hairy paw. "I and you don't need any writing between us, do we, Miss Lee? Your word's good enough for me, all right . . . "

His hand was warm and moist and strong . . .

XXXVII

HARRY LONTAINE got home at a late hour for one who had it in mind to bathe, dress, and put in appearance for an eight o'clock dinner several miles away. So was the tempo of his gait unhurried as he left the blue-and-white car waiting at the curb and passed up the straight-ruled sidewalk of cement between the tutelary orange trees of the bungalow he rented furnished. And on its miniature veranda he delayed for several minutes, motionless, with his face lifted thoughtfully, even a shade wistfully to the sky in which the afterglow of sunset pulsed like dreams of youth reviewed across the desert years of middle-age . . .

Other than this shy colour of regret, however, nothing of the trend of his thoughts, nothing of their nature, escaped the eyes, steel-blue and dense, in that lean, hard mould of features, never more self-contained, never more British than in this moment.

And presently he roused, but without change of countenance, and went on into the combination living and dining-room to which the best part of the dwelling was given over.

Here, where the dusk held close and still, Lontaine, when he had made a light, wasted no more time than was required for a stop at the buffet to treat himself to a considerably stiffer drink of psuedo-Scotch than the law allowed, or—seeing that the law allowed none at all—his superficial necessities seemed to call for.

Before the door which gave upon the more private quarters of the house, however, he hung for some time in seeming reluctance to proceed, a suspicion of strained at-

tentiveness in his deliberation. From beyond came never a sound. Eventually he pushed the door open.

Immediately he saw Fanny. Bathed in a great glare, she sat in her dressing-room facing a long mirror of three panels; decked out en grande toilette, wearing every jewel she possessed, groomed to the finest nuance of perfection; a brilliant and strangely immobile figurine of modern femininity, with bobbed hair like burnished brass, milk-white bosom and arms rising out of a calyx of peach-blow taffeta, jewels stung to iridescent life by that fierce wash of light.

As if hypnotized by so much bright loveliness, she continued steadfastly to gaze upon her reflected self; even when she heard Lontaine at the door and the mirror placed him behind her in the doorway, she did not move by so much as a trembling eyelash. Only when he spoke, her lips parted in answer, though still she neither turned nor ceased to contemplate the vision in the glass; as if this last were something precious but tricksy, something that might incontinently vanish forever from her ken did she but for a single instant turn her eyes away.

In a voice that strained without success to sound easy and natural, Lontaine said: "Ah, Fanny! dressed already, eh? Must be later than I thought."

"It's past half-past," Fanny replied without expression.

Lontaine glanced nervously at the back of his wrist. "Right you are. Never dreamed time was getting away from me like that."

"You have been . . . busy, yes?" his wife enquired with a distinctly satiric accent.

"Rather. Gassing with Zinn, you know——"

"To be sure." The satiric inflexion was now more marked. "The life-saver."

"Not a bad name for him, that." Lontaine chuckled with, however, an unconvincing brevity. "Daresay Linda looks on the little beast in that light, at all events. Had

a thousand details to discuss with him . . . ah . . . naturally."

"Naturally." Fanny's tone had become again illegible.

"That's what—ah—delayed me. Have to rush for it now—what?—or Summerlad 'll be vexed."

"You really think so? With Cindy there to console him?"

"Something in that, no doubt. Still"—Lontaine made as if to go to his own room, but lingered—"it's hardly the thing to be so much behind time. See here, old girl: you're all dressed . . . I say! but you've laid it on a bit thick tonight, haven't you?"

"Don't you like the way I look, Harry?"

"Never more ravishing in all your life——"

"That's good."

"Good? Afraid I don't follow. What's got into you tonight, Fanny? You've rigged yourself out for the opera instead of a simple little dinner . . . "

"I wanted something to remember myself by," Fanny mysteriously informed the mirror to which her attention continued constant.

"What do you mean by that?" Lontaine paused for answer, but Fanny was dumb. He essayed another short, confused laugh. "You know, Fan, sometimes you think of the damnedest things to say."

"Yes: don't I?"

He recognized one of her mulishly enigmatic moods.

"Mean to say," he harked back—"since you're quite ready—what's the matter with your cutting along and explaining I'll be delayed a bit? Tell them not to wait dinner for me . . . "

"And you?" The movement of enameled lips was imperceptible.

"I'll be along later, of course, as soon as I've dressed. You can send the car back for me. Why not?"

"Why not?"

But Lontaine took this inscrutable echo for assent, and

with a grunt of relief disappeared into his dressing-room. A series of clicks sounded as he turned on lights. Still the woman seated before the mirror didn't move. But her interest centered no longer upon what she saw; though she did not avert her eyes from the glowing figure painted in those still, shallow depths, all her attention now was concentrated in another faculty: she was listening.

She heard Lontaine moving about, chair-legs scrape a hardwood floor, the snap of the bathroom light. A pause followed, then a clashing noise of bottles and toilet articles impatiently shifted upon their glass shelf. After that, Lontaine's returning footsteps. Then he reappeared in the doorway.

"Hello! Thought you were going on ahead."

"Presently," Fanny replied in brittle accents. "Plenty of time. Something the matter?"

"Can't find my razors."

"No." At last the woman broke her pose: her counterfeit in the glass nodded gravely to the man behind her. "No," she iterated—and he had the flying thought that her voice had never vibrated so sweetly—"and you won't find them, either, Harry. They're in a safe place, it's no good your hunting for them."

"What!" Lontaine advanced one single, sudden stride. "What's that for?"

"I thought it might save trouble. You see, Harry, I haven't forgotten that hideous scene we had in London, last time you decided it was all up with you, there wasn't anything to do but cut your throat. I didn't see any sense in going through all that again."

After a full minute of silence Lontaine uttered heavily: "I see you've guessed . . . "

"There have been so many of these crises in our life together, Harry, I ought to know the signs—don't you think?"

The man stumbled to a chair, and bent a louring coun-

tenance over hands savagely laced. "What else can I do?" he muttered. "I'm in a hole there's no other way out of . . . "

"There are steamers every so often from San Francisco, for Honolulu, China, Japan, the South Seas . . . "

"No use. They'd get me by wireless if they ever allowed me to go aboard. Zinn . . . I'm sure that Jew devil suspects . . . insists on getting at the books first thing tomorrow."

"How much have you got into Cindy for?"

Lontaine said stupidly: "Eh? What's that?"

"How much have you . . . borrowed, Harry?"

"Fifty thou—perhaps a bit more."

Following another little silence, Fanny gave a curt laugh, left her chair and, standing at the dressing-table, began slowly to strip off her jewels, her sunburst brooch, her flexible bracelets, the pearls that had been her mother's, all her rings, even that slender hoop of platinum and diamonds which she had never removed since the day of her marriage.

"Stocks?" she enquired quietly. Lontaine replied with a dour nod and grunt. "Somebody's sure-fire tip, of course, some 'deal' that couldn't lose . . . " He grunted again. "Never learn anything from experience, do you, Harry? I've often wondered about the kink in your mind that makes you such a giddy come-on, eager to risk everything, even your honour, on the gossip of stock-market touts no better than yourself . . . Ah, well! it can't be helped, I suppose. You are what you are—and in my way, God knows, I'm no better. It's all been a ghastly failure, hasn't it, Harry? If I'd been a stronger woman, I might have made it another story for you; if you'd been more of a man, you might even have saved me . . . " Lontaine lifted his hand sharply, but his eyes wavered and fell under her level, ironic stare.

"But it's no good crying now, nothing can change our natures at this late day."

She crossed to him and paused, looking down not unkindly at his bowed head and shoulders.

"I don't love you, Harry, and you don't love me. It's funny to think we ever did—isn't it? All the same, we've been through the rough together so often, I presume it's only natural I should be fond of you in this funny, twisted fashion. I don't want you to go away thinking I blame you . . . "

"Go away?" Lontaine groaned. "Where can I go, they wouldn't find me? I'd rather be dead than a convict!"

"Don't worry: I'll soon talk Cindy round, persuade her not to be too hard on you. She's fond of me, poor dear! and won't find out I'm as rotten as you are till you're at a safe distance. Here . . . " She bent over and poured that coruscating wealth of jewelry into the cup of Lontaine's hands. "These ought to see you a long way . . . "

"What!" Lontaine jumped up, staring in daze at the treasure in the hands that instinctively reached out to Fanny, offering to give back her gift. But she stepped away and stood with hands behind her, shaking her head so vigorously that the glistening short locks stood out like a brazen nimbus. "But, you, Fanny—what will you—?"

"Never fear for me, Harry." She fixed his puzzled eyes with a smile of profoundly ironical significance. "I'll get along . . . "

"But these . . . every blessed trinket you own . . . !"

"I'll get others."

His jaw dropped. She continued to posture lightly before him, an exquisitely fragile and pretty shape of youth deathless and audacious, a dainty spirit of mockery temptingly incarnate, diabolically sage, diabolically sure of the potency of her time-old lures . . . What she had urged was true enough, too true; idle to let scruples on

her account work his undoing. Let her alone and she'd get along, no fear, she'd get other jewels when she wanted them, just as she'd said, she'd go far . . . At heart as wanton as he was weak . . .

He felt a creeping tide of blood begin to scorch his face, and avoided the cynical challenge of her eyes.

"If you're content," he mumbled . . . "daresay there's nothing more to be said."

She nodded gayly, repeating the word "Nothing!" in a flute-like note of mirth. Hanging his head, he began wretchedly to stuff the plunder into his pockets, muttering half to himself: "What a pity! If only I could have had a bit of luck; if only we could have hit it off——!"

"If you hurry," she reminded him, "you can catch the night train for San Francisco, you can just about make it."

"Well . . . " He glanced uneasily at her, and again was conscious of the heat in his cheeks. "So it comes to this at last . . . eh? . . . good-bye!"

"Good-bye," she repeated, amiably casual.

"I daresay . . . " He gave a dubious chuckle. "Daresay it's stupid but, well, the usual thing, you know . . . "

"Usual thing?" she parroted, with faintly knitted brows.

"To kiss good-bye."

"You'll miss your train."

He developed a moment of desperately sincere emotion: "Fan! you've been a perfect brick to me, a perfect brick. I feel like a dog, leaving you like this."

"Oh!" she said, as one indulges a persistent child—"if you really want to kiss me, Harry, go ahead."

Nevertheless she turned her mouth aside, his lips brushed only her powdered cheek. Then she stepped back to her mirror and with a puff made good her imperceptible damage done by the caress. The glass showed Lontaine's shadow slinking out. She heard him blunder through the living-room, the slam of the screen-door. And her hand fumbled, the powder-puff dropped unheeded,

mist drifted across her vision, she gasped a breathless "Damn!" Tears meant a wrecked make-up . . .

Though there was need enough for haste if he were to carry out the plan she had made for him, Lontaine dragged slowly down the walk, with a hang-dog air, the hands in his pockets fingering the price of the last sorry shreds of his self-respect. In the darkness the flesh of his face still burned with fire of shame . . .

Beside the car he halted and rested with a hand on the door for so long a time that the chauffeur grew inquisitive.

"Where to, Mr. Lontaine?"

"No, by God!" Lontaine blurted into the man's astonished face, and whirling about, strode hastily back to the bungalow.

As he drew near he could hear Fanny's voice. She was at the telephone in the living-room, calling a number he didn't catch; Summerlad's no doubt. One had forgotten all about that wretched dinner. Then the connection was established, and he paused with foot lifted to the lowermost of the veranda steps. It couldn't be possible Fan was talking to Summerlad, in that voice whose tenderness called back old times . . .

"Hello? Is it you, dear? Fanny . . . First chance I've had . . . Poor darling! I've been aching to see you all day and tell you how I sympathized . . . Yes, any time you please, as soon as you like. . . . No: he won't mind, he . . . I mean, I'm all alone. Besides, we had a little talk tonight, came to an understanding. He won't be in our way after this, ever again, Barry dear . . . ."

Something amused her, peals of musical laughter hunted Lontaine down the walk. "Union Pacific Station!" he cried, throwing himself into the car. "Drive like hell!"

XXXVIII

THAT sunset whose reluctant waning Lontaine was presently to watch from the bungalow veranda was still a glory in the sky when Lucinda motored to Beverly Hills. The heavens in the west had opened out like a many-petalled rose of radiant promise, whose reflected glow deepened the warm carnation of her face and found response in the slow fire that burned in dreaming eyes. Those whose chance it was to view so much mortal loveliness in too fleeting glimpses all envied its possessor, women her lot, men her lover's.

The soft air of evening, already tempered with an earnest of the coolth to come, was sweet to taste with parted lips. Upon the perfect highroad the car swung and swooped and swerved like a swallow, through a countryside lapped in perennial Spring. She thought: This blessed land! and thought herself thrice-blessed to be at once in it, in love, and in the fairest flower of her years.

Odd, how completely that compact with Zinn, which the clasp of their hands had sealed so lately, had done away with every form of fear and discontent. Vanity had a deal to do with that, no doubt, self-esteem purring with conviction that Zinn would never have offered to invest one lonely dollar in the picture had not his appraisement of Lucinda's work on the screen approved the risk. Zinn smelt profits in the wind; that much was manifest; which meant that success was assured to Linda Lee. The loss of half the little fortune she had sunk in the production was a mean price to pay for knowledge that failure could now reward her hopes only through some frown of fortune unanticipated by one of the canniest of those sure-

thing gamblers whom the American cinema acclaims its financial genii.

Best of all, this new association spelled an end to all that meaningless and inexcusable procrastination from which the work had suffered whenever Nolan felt overworked or harkened to the call of the continuous crap game, an institution of the studio that had its permanent habitat behind one of the stages. Zinn was notoriously scant of patience with delays that meant money thrown away; and, he had assured Lucinda (after striking his bargain) no reason existed within his knowledge why another fortnight shouldn't see the last scenes of her production shot. Much admittedly depended on how little or much of Nolan's work might seem to need retaking, when the three of them, Lucinda, Zinn and the new director, sat in judgment on the rushes in rough assemblage. But Zinn didn't believe they would find many instances of incompetent or indifferent direction so flagrant that they couldn't be cured in the cutting-room. . . . It's surprising what a cunning pair of shears and a neat subtitle or two can do for a scene that, as originally photographed, is good for nothing but insomnia or to bring on sclerosis of the sense of humour.

Nolan had left to the direction of his successor only the sequences in two sets. Lucinda made out a mental timetable: a week for the supper club scenes, less time than that for the living-room; another week for possible retakes, one more in which to cut and assemble the finished picture. In a month at most she ought to be able to call herself once more a free woman and bid farewell to Hollywood till the courts had made that boast a statement of consummated fact.

A single month! Such a little time when the journey's end was well in sight, a little time to wait for life to yield up all its riches. It was harder, truly, to be patient till this lesser journey should duly come to its appointed end in lovers' meeting. The car was a snail, minutes sluggards,

the beauty of the land a bore to one bitterly jealous of every second which heed for speed laws stole from the half-hour she had schemed to have alone with Lynn before the Lontaines were to be expected. She had so much happiness to share with her beloved, so much to tell, everything that had happened since morning, a busy chapter of studio history of which he could know nothing, since he had not revisited the studio since leaving it for work on location that morning.

It seemed a churlish chance indeed that ordained a reception for her exclusively at the hands and glistening teeth of a semi-intelligible Jap, who, when he had uttered assorted fragments of English to the general sense that Mister was having his foot treated by an osteopath at the moment but would soon be disengaged, smirked himself into an indeterminate background and left Lucinda to make the best of this minor disappointment.

Resolutely denying this last, she put off her wrap, made herself at home, and sought but somehow failed to distill a compensating thrill from the reflection that she would ere long be called upon to make herself at home here for good and all. 'Ere long' meaning, of course, after Reno . . . And why not? The house was excellently planned, amply big for two; no reason why Lynn need move unless he really wanted to. Only . . . the eye of the prospective chatelaine took on a critical cast . . . some details would want a bit of readjustment, the all too patent stamp of the interior decorator's damned good taste would require obliteration before one would care to call the premises one's very own. The present scheme, for example, lacked anything in the nature of a study, wherein one might lounge and read and accumulate quantities of books; according to Lucinda's notion, the real nucleus of a home for civilized people. Lynn, poor dear! worked so hard, he had little time to give to reading; a moan it was his wont to make whenever Lucinda gave their talks a literary turn. The few volumes of his

collection stood in sadly broken ranks on a rack of shelves in an alcove that adjoined the living-room, a sort of glory-hole furnished with odds and ends of sham Oriental junk which Lynn called his "den" and Fanny had re-christened "the vamp room."

Curiosity concerning Lynn's tastes, when he did find time to read, moved Lucinda to con the straggling squad of titles. Novels led in number, naturally, works of fiction old and new, in general such trash as furnishes the cinema with most of its plot material. In addition, a subscription set of De Maupassant with several volumes missing, another of O. Henry, Wells' *The Outline of History* (uncut), the *Collected Verse* of Rudyard Kipling, six copies of the same edition of *"Who's Who on the Screen,* Laurence Hope's *Indian Love Lyrics* in an exceptionally beautiful binding . . .

With a chuckle Lucinda took possession of this last: Lynn *would* have Laurence Hope! . . . Evidently a gift copy. When she opened the book at its fly-leaf, a slip of printed paper fluttered out. Without pausing to read the inscription, Lucinda retrieved the clipping: a half-tone from one of the motion-picture monthlies, a view of the bungalow grounds, with the house in the distance, and in the foreground Lynn and a young woman arm-in-arm, laughing at the camera . . .

The evening had grown quite dark when a crisp rattle of the telephone startled Lucinda into renewed contact with her surroundings. She found herself in the recess of one of the living-room windows that looked out over the lawn. The book was in her hand. Behind her a door opened, releasing upon the gloom a gush of golden light. Without moving she watched Summerlad, in a dressing-gown hastily thrown on over dress-shirt and trousers, hobble over to the telephone and conduct one end of a short conversation of which her wits made no sense whatever. He hung up, and peered blindly round the room.

"Linda, darling?" he called. "What's the big idea, sitting all alone in the dark?" At the same time he switched on wall-sconces and, blinking, saw her. "Just our luck!" he grumbled, trying to sound disconsolate. "What do you think, sweetheart? Fanny says they can't come tonight; Harry's laid up, got a sick headache or something, and she doesn't think she ought to leave him. I wonder if you'd mind dining here with me alone, this once. I can't very well go out with this foot. Eh? What do you think?"

Lucinda made no sound. His eyes narrowed as he perceived the abnormal absence of colour in her face, the dark dilation of her unwavering eyes. Limping, he approached.

"What's the matter, Linda? Not cross with me, are you? Hadn't any idea you'd be so early; and today I gave my foot another nasty wrench, out on location, and had to call Cheney in to fix it up. He's just left, and I was starting to dress . . . What?"

An entreating hand silenced him. All in a breath Lucinda said: "Those things don't matter, Lynn. Why didn't you ever tell me you were married?"

Summerlad said "Damnation!" half under his breath and moved nearer, till another flutter of her hand stopped him. "That wise husband of yours!" he exploded then, vindictively. "I suppose he's been spilling all he knows!"

"Did Bel know? Yes: I presume he must have. But you're mistaken, he didn't tell me. It was this . . ."

Summerlad frowned, at a loss to identify the volume in her extended hand.

"I found it, Lynn, quite by accident, while I was waiting. Hope's *Indian Love Lyrics*. Don't you remember? . . . See, it's inscribed: *'To my Lynn, on the first anniversary of our marriage, with all my heart, Nelly.'* And then this picture of you two, published just after you came here to live . . . Oh, Lynn! *why* did you lie to me about that poor girl?"

For a moment Summerlad gnawed his underlip without attempting to reply. Then with a sign of despair he retreated to one end of the club-lounge, against which he rested, to ease his foot. He said something in an angry mumble, as Lucinda followed into the room.

"You might have told me, Lynn . . . "

"I didn't want you to know."

"You must have known I'd find out, sooner or later."

"I thought I could keep it from you until . . . "

"Till when? Till what?" He growled, inarticulate with vexation. "To let me go on thinking . . . making sucn a fool of myself . . . ! Since you don't live together, why aren't you divorced?"

"How do you know I'm not?"

"Because you told me that lying story about her. But you've lied to me so much and so long, no doubt you think it unreasonable of me now to expect you to remember everything . . . Anyway, if you'd been divorced, you wouldn't have hesitated to own it. Why aren't you?"

"She refuses to divorce me."

"Why?"

"How do I know? I suppose she's still stuck on me, in her way—hopes to get me back some time."

"But what prevents you——?"

"Nelly said if I tried to divorce her she'd fight back, and she knows . . . "

He didn't finish, but shut his teeth on a blundering tongue and looked more than ever guilty. But Lucinda was in a pitiless temper.

"About you? You mean—about you and other women?"

"Hang it all! I've never pretended to be a saint, have I, Linda?"

"No wonder the poor thing hated the sight of me! . . . Oh, how could you have been so unkind!"

"If you'd only give me a show to explain . . . "

Her lip curled: "Explain!"

"I've been doing my best," Summerlad argued resentfully. "When I saw how it was going to be with you and me, and found out Nelly'd come back to Hollywood, I went to her and had things out—gave her some money and promised her more, on the strength of her promise to go back home and get a divorce on the dead quiet."

"And did you hope to keep that a secret from me?"

"My name isn't Summerlad, anymore than hers is Marquis—or yours Lee. I thought I'd . . . I thought everything was going to be all right till she turned up again with your officious husband."

"You think Bel had something to do——"

"I think he hunted Nelly up, if you want to know, and induced her to come back here, in violation of her agreement."

"But Bel . . . I don't quite see . . . "

"He wanted Nelly on the spot as a sort of club over my head. He hasn't given you up yet"—Summerlad laughed shortly—"not by a long sight."

"A club over your head? I don't understand."

"Not meaning to use it as long as we behaved ourselves."

"Behaved ourselves! Lynn!"

"Oh, forgive me! I didn't mean to say that."

Summerlad's look mirrored a real and poignant contrition as he saw her colouring with affronted sensibility, drawing back from him, momentarily slipping farther beyond his reach. "Linda!" he implored—"don't look at me that way. I can't help what your husband thinks, can I? I didn't ask him to come out here and be the pest he is, did I? After all, what have I done? I lied about Nelly—yes—but only to spare your feelings. I didn't want you to think people might be talking about you, stepping out with a married man. If you'd thought that, you'd have given me my walking papers and . . . and I couldn't do without you, dear—I can't! The others never mattered much, they sort of came and went, mostly I didn't care

which they did. But you're so different, you're so wonderful, everything a fellow dreams about. I've never known anybody like you, never will again. If I lost you I'd—I'd—I think I'd go out of my mind!"

And suddenly, before she could stir to escape, he caught her to him and held her fast.

"Linda, sweetheart; don't be angry with me. I've tried so hard to be good enough for you. And you—you've loved me, too! Don't let this rotten accident spoil everything for us. If you love me—and you know I love you—what does anything matter? What if we are both married? What difference need that make? Love can still be sweet . . . "

She made no show of opposition, only drew back her head to cheat his lips; but when she tried to brave his eyes, thinking to read therein his heart and mind, she winced from recognition of the hunger that informed them, hunger that she wittingly had whetted, hunger such as she herself had too often known of late, like warm wine running in one's veins . . .

But always ere now she had fortified and shriven her conscience with the belief that they were of one mind, it must and would be Reno first . . .

Now Reno no longer held forth any promise of salvation, of the law's sanction, the church's countenance. Even though she were to find there her own freedom, Lynn would still be bound. It wasn't in reason to hope that the woman who had rejected his money would listen to other arguments. Today and henceforward it must be all for love or . . . nothing . . . a break final and irreparable . . .

And for all the shock she had suffered, for all the wrong Lynn had done and the pain of which his ill-faith had been the cause, the love she had given the man still was dear, dangerously sweet and disarming. Already she was aware of anxiety to grasp at excuses for him, to comfort the ache in her heart with the thought that she was

according charity to a dear transgressor, already she felt her strength to resist being sapped, flesh and spirit succumbing anew to the spell he knew too well how to weave.

She wrestled with a weakness stronger than all her strength. They couldn't go on like this . . . Lynn hadn't said it, but they both knew it . . . without going farther . . . Even Reno couldn't save her now, only the instinct of self-preservation latent in her, not even that if she failed to find in herself the will to hear and be guided by its admonishments. It was make or break . . .

The scales hung long in trembling. They turned only when Summerlad unwisely, losing patience, sought to take by storm the lips she had not yet made up her mind to surrender, and thus aroused resistance till then dormant.

With an ease that in a queer, detached way she found surprising, she managed to break his embrace. Nevertheless the effort left her faint. She faltered to the fireplace and rested a hand on the mantel, her forehead upon the hand. Lynn followed, stood by her side, not touching her but keeping her enveloped in the lethargizing knowledge of his nearness, his strength, his passion. Over and over he murmured gently: "Linda, Linda, Linda . . . " Shaking from head to feet, she made a feeble sign of appeal. He disregarded this entirely, his arms again stole round her and would have drawn her to him but that, of a sudden, her mind caught at a straw of memory, she drew away, with a hand upon his bosom put him firmly from her, eyes that were melting none the less denying him, lips that were a-quiver with "Yes" resolutely pronouncing "No!"

"You are cruel . . . "

"No, Lynn. Wait. Tell me something . . . You say she—your wife agreed to divorce you?"

"I made her promise," Summerlad asserted grimly.

"When was that? The day she disappeared? The day I found her lying senseless in her room?"

"I suppose so. Does it matter? Well, then—yes."

"You'd just left her when I found her?"

"I daresay—approximately."

"Tell me what you said to persuade her."

"See here: what is all this? What are you driving at?"

"I want to know . . . Did you have much of a scene?"

"I'll say it was some stormy young session."

"Is that why you found it necessary to strike her?"

Summerlad started. "What! Strike her! What do you mean?"

But his eyes winced from hers.

"She—Nelly had a bruise on her cheek, that afternoon; and it wasn't an old bruise. Lynn: you struck her!"

"Perhaps. Maybe I did forget myself, I don't remember. What if I did? She asked for it, didn't she? Do you think I've got the patience of Job, to let her get away with insisting on standing between you and me? I'd have half-killed her if she'd stuck to her refusal to go back East!"

Realizing that his tongue was again running away with his discretion, he curbed it sharply, on the verge, perhaps, of admissions yet more damaging, and in panic essayed to win back lost ground.

"But what of that? It's ancient history, Linda."

She started back in repulsion, but he overtook her in the middle of the room and again crushed her to him.

"Linda, Linda! what do these things matter? I love you, dearest, you love me, nothing else matters, nothing can possibly matter but our need for each other. For God's sake be kind to me! forget——"

The fury of her antagonism found him unprepared. Once more his arms were empty. And this time when he started in pursuit, something he couldn't see struck him brutally in the chest and bodily threw him back. In the same instant he heard a heavy, crashing noise he

couldn't account for. An inhuman sound. It shook the room, beat deafeningly upon one's ears. As if someone had overturned a heavy piece of furniture. Only, no one had. Certainly he hadn't, certainly Lucinda hadn't. She was flattened against the farther wall, watching him with a face of horror, blanched and gaping.

Enraged, he put forth all his strength to recover from that inexplicable blow. And instantly it was repeated. And again. Each time accompanied by that savage, crashing noise. Like thunder cut off short. And each time he reeled under the impact, and sickening pains shot through him, like knives white-hot. He felt himself sinking . . .

In expiring flashes of consciousness he saw Lucinda, still flat against the wall, staring not at him but at a French window nearby. Between its curtains a woman's arm was thrust, the hand grasping an automatic pistol with muzzle faintly fuming. There was a face of shadowed pallor dimly visible beyond the curtains, a face with wild, exultant eyes . . . Nelly's . . .

XXXIX

TO the woman pinned to the wall by shock—the shimmering frivolity of her evening gown, a flimsy, fluttery affair of silver tissue, lilac and blue, lending form and colour to the illusion of a bright butterfly impaled—the moments immediately following that murderous fusillade were a raving welter of horrors.

Between two heartbeats she saw Lynn, with a face as blank as paper, spinning, toppling, beating the air with aimless arms, pitching to the floor like something blasted, resting there in a sickening, inert crumple; and was keenly aware of the acrid reek of smokeless powder cutting, as acid cuts oil, the sensuous scent of the roses that dressed the room in her honour; and all the while was conscious of the pistol nosing in between the draperies like an animate thing of infinite malice, and the pallid oval of the face behind it, that seemed to float in the dark as might the mask of some mad ghost.

As the din of those three shots, beating from wall to wall, lost weight and volume, a thin shouting became audible from some point outside the house, and Nelly Marquis with the sweep of a fury broke through the hangings at the window, and pulled up with pistol levelled point-blank at Lucinda's breast.

Through the least of pauses, the merest fragment of a second, a time measureless in its lapse to one whose every function was frozen in paralysis of fear, a single thought persisted: *Another instant and I shall be as Lynn . . .* Nelly's eyes were burning like black malignant opals in a countenance at once luminous and wan. Death's icy grin glimpsed in the play of light along that blunt blue

barrel. Lucinda felt as one caught fast in the pitiless jaws of some tremendous vice whose pinch stilled the beating of her heart and arrested her labouring lungs.

Then abruptly through the window a dark body hurled and fastening upon the woman's back, swinging her aside, the pistol detonated with a bellow, the bullet plumped into the wall close by Lucinda's head.

She heard a voice crying out again and again: "Bel! Bel! Bel!" . . .

Her own voice . . .

For an indeterminable time she hung in dread upon the issue of that swaying combat: while Bel clung to the woman's arm, muttering and panting in futile efforts to wrest her weapon away; while Nelly clawed, bit, kicked, pounded her free fist repeatedly into Bel's face, and wrenched madly at her captive wrist.

Of a sudden, from her hand a spiteful tongue of fire licked out at Bel, his right arm flailed back and fell useless, agony convulsed his features; and free, the woman bounded away and with the laugh of a maniac swung the pistol to bear upon his head.

Lucinda's faculties clicked together then as gears mesh when the motor has been idling; the call of the emergency met with response in the form of instant and direct action. Without knowing what she did, she flung herself upon Nelly's arm and bore it down. With deflected muzzle the pistol exploded for the last time. Dropping it, Nelly turned on Lucinda and dealt with her as might a madwoman. Impressions grew confused beyond assortment, of flopping wildly this way and that, of hot breath beating into her face, of her bare flesh suffering a rain of cruel blows; of elemental lusts to maim and kill awakening from lifelong slumber, in this moment of close grips with a warm, living, hating and hateful human body . . .

Thrown off without warning, how she couldn't guess, she felt herself reeling back, tripping, falling. Something

struck the back of her head a stunning blow, and she knew flickering nausea while dense night like a moving cloud on every hand closed in upon her, and the world, in the likeness of a rainbow swirl streaked with fiery paths of sparks, guttered into blank nullity . . .

Nothingness absolute and still received her, harboured her for a space, spewed her back into life again.

Cold rain spattering cheeks and brows . . . once more the heartrending perfume of roses . . . anguish incomparable racking her temples . . . her heart a wild thing caged . . . ammonia in strangling whiffs . . .

Choking and coughing she unclosed her eyes upon the vision of Bel's face. A hand holding a bottle of smelling salts dropped away from her nose. Bel saluted her reviving intelligence with an even growl: "Coming round, eh? About time. You'll do now, I guess. Try to pull yourself together. No time to lose."

She was on the floor, the bulk of the lounge between her and the spot where Summerlad had fallen; her shoulders propped against Bel's knee, her head resting in the crook of his arm. Summerlad's Jap boy was standing by with water in a silver vessel. At a nod from Bel he filled a glass and, bending over, set it to Lucinda's lips. While she was gulping thirstily, Bel said something she didn't catch; but as soon as she turned her head from the glass, the Japanese took it away and himself as well.

The living-room, with its softly lighted walls and draped black rectangles of windows open to the night, presented itself in a guise inexplicably unfamiliar. She felt as if she had been a long time away. In mystification, looking back to Bel, she asked: "I fainted, didn't I?"

He grunted: "You struck your head, when that hell-cat threw you—went out for ten minutes by the clock. How do you feel now?"

"My head aches . . . " She discovered that Bel was in his shirt-sleeves, with the cuff turned back above

his right elbow, the forearm rudely bandaged with torn linen on which a deep stain was spreading. "But Bel—your arm——?"

"Hurts like hell, but that's the worst of it, thank God. Bullet ploughed through the underside from wrist to elbow, nearly. I'd be dead if you hadn't jumped for her."

"And I, if you hadn't come through the window when you did."

"If you're grateful for that—try to get up."

"But . . . Lynn?"

Bel laughed shortly. "The excellent Mr. Summerlad's all right—I mean to say, still breathing. That's all we can tell till the surgeon gets here. I've telephoned. The fellow ought to show up any minute now. If you can manage to get a grip on yourself, I'd be glad to get you out of here first."

"I don't understand . . What became of—her?"

"Got away clean, worse luck!—ducked past me and through the window like a shot. I tried to follow but she gave me the slip in the dark. *That's* all right: she won't trouble us again. She left her pistol behind—anyway, it was empty—and the police will pick her up before morning . . . Now: how about getting up?"

"I'll try," Lucinda said meekly. "Please help me." But then, appreciating that she was in no way incapacitated, she got up unaided, and steadied herself with a hand on the back of the lounge.

Summerlad lay where he had fallen, on the far side of that piece of furniture. His face, upturned to the staring light, was like a thing of sculptured ivory, expressionless and bleached; the lips ajar, the whites of his eyes alone visible under the half-shut lids with their effeminate lashes. The shirt beneath the flowered dressing-gown was hideously blotted. He was so deathly still that terror took hold on Lucinda's heart and mind.

"You think . . . O Bel! do you really think he will live?"

"No fear," Bel sneered. "He'll make a fool of many another woman before he's finished. Here: put this on, will you?"

He was proffering her wrap. Like an automaton Lucinda accepted it, but seemed to forget that the thing was meant for wear.

"Where's your car?"

"I told my driver to call up about ten——"

"I'll attend to that, then. My chauffeur will run you down to the hotel. I think he's to be trusted. Wish I felt as sure of that Jap."

"Sure of him?"

"Why do you suppose I'm hurrying you away? Do you want the papers to get hold of the fact you were keeping an assignation with this actor when his wife caught you and shot him?"

Lucinda flinched, faintly remonstrated: "Bel!"

"Well?" he demanded—"got anything to say to that?"

"You don't think . . . nobody would dare . . . "

"What's the reason I don't think? Why wouldn't anybody dare? I presume you expect the world—this good, kind, charitable world we live in—to believe 'appearances are against you'!"

Affronted, she held her answer, seeing her husband as with eyes from which scales had newly dropped, as a man she barely knew, whose fleshy husk alone was familiar in her sight, but whose spirit was altogether strange: a man self-reliant and resolute, skeptical, cold and hard of temper, estranged and unforgiving; witness the contemptuous incredulity that animated his regard.

Smouldering indignation blazed, she threw back her head with eyes as cold as his, a mouth as hard.

"You are insolent," she pronounced slowly. "If you think—if you dare think what you hint—what is it to you whether I go or stay?"

"You forget you neglected to get rid of a husband before taking on with this busy lover . . . who got

precisely what was coming to him, if you want the truth for once!"

"Do I hear you setting yourself up to judge him, Bel?"

"Do you know anybody better qualified?"

"By what right——"

"The husband's right! Do you think I want every paper in the country linking your name—my wife's—with Lynn Summerlad's as his latest mistress, the woman who made his deserted wife so jealous she tried to murder him?"

Lucinda let her wrap fall. "If my relationship to Lynn is what you imply—then my place is here with him."

"Please yourself. But remember, the papers are going to make big capital out of this scandal in the movie colony. They've been itching for it for years, licking their chops with impatience, knowing it was bound to break some day . . . Good God! what's got into you, Linda? How long do you imagine it'll be, after this affair gets into print, before the reporters will ferret out the fact that 'Linda Lee' is Mrs. Bellamy Druce? Do you want to go into a witness-box and testify against that demented creature when she's tried for murder? Do you want everybody who knows you—all your friends back home—to think what everybody in his sane mind has every right to think?"

"What you think . . . "

"What the devil do you care what *I* think? But if it comes to that, tell me this: If you aren't what people are going to say you are, what are you doing here, alone with Summerlad, in his own home, at night?"

"The Lontaines were coming to dinner, but——"

"'But'!" Bel snorted. "Oh, all right! I'll be a high-minded ass, if that'll satisfy you; I'll give you the benefit of the doubt, if that'll induce you to clear out of this before it's too late. But don't forget I'm the only one who will. His wife wouldn't—didn't. Neither will another living soul who knows you were here when this

thing happened. Your only salvation now is to get back to the hotel and lie low; if you hear any rumours, be as much surprised as anybody; if you're asked any questions, know absolutely nothing. If you'll do that, and leave the rest to me, perhaps I can save you."

"You are too kind——"

"I'm not. Don't fool yourself. I'm thinking of nobody but Bellamy Druce. All I'm after is to save my name from being linked up with this rotten business. Think of yourself, as I'm thinking of myself, then. Think whether it's going to be worth the name you'll get, to have the satisfaction of this heroic gesture, this theatrical effect of sticking bravely by the side of your actor lover—so nobly wounded!—this man whose promiscuous amours have made his name a by-word even here, even in Hollywood! . . . But for the love of God, think quickly!"

He ceased upon a note of impatient admonishment, then, when Lucinda remained silent, changed his tone.

"I treated you badly enough, God knows! but you paid me out properly, you can afford to be magnanimous now. I've done nothing to deserve your active ill-will since you left me. And it isn't as if you could do Summerlad any good by staying. His fate's all up to the surgeons. And you can trust me to see that everything possible is done for him. I'll keep you posted, I'll come to the hotel tonight and tell you what the surgeon says."

He bent with painful effort and lifted her wrap. She took it without a word, swung it round her shoulders, turned and left the room.

Bellamy followed as far as the front door. His car was waiting on the drive, its motor running. The chauffeur, already instructed, held the tonneau door for Lucinda, closed it smartly, smartly climbed into place at the wheel. She looked back as they drew away. Bellamy stood en silhouette against the light, nursing his bandaged arm. A turn in the drive blocked out that picture, the car wheeled sharply into the public street, gathered speed.

And Lucinda crouched down in her corner, chilled to her marrow by realization of the loneliness of her lot, from whom Life had stripped away even the forlorn company of her last, most dear illusion . . .

XL

AMAZING to learn, upon authority as sound as that of the clock in the hotel lobby, that the age of the evening was still something short of nine . . . preposterous to credit that lapse of time so little could have wrought the transformation of life's kindly countenance at close of day to its present cast, so bleak, forbidding, and implacable . . .

Yet neither circumstance was a whit less certain or more disputable than the other. And that the hour was what it was, no earlier, no later, gave one good reason for thanksgiving. For now the miscellaneous dinner mob with its components of envious sharp eyes and ungenerous tongues had scattered on its various ways; while the cinemaniacs were not yet due to come trooping home from the neighbouring halls of their addiction. Only the elderlies remained in evidence, that element of the clientele which Fanny had styled the Grumpies in discrimination from the Gaddies; staid, smug bodies in black taffeta, old lace fichus and rocking-chairs, or stiff collars, shapeless trousers and blunt-nosed boots, devoted to solitaire, fancy-work, and gossip of the home-brewed brand that cheers but not inebriates; a species of migratory perennials to whom the cotton-wool climate of Southern California is a sort of gracious prelude to the grave; at once avidly intrigued by and as honestly innocent of that other Hollywood with whose lively denizens they rubbed shoulders daily, as of the other world and its press of equally unquiet souls.

Dotting the public rooms with little groups, engrossed in cards, knitting, and placid prattle, these took only

casual account of the flying transit of that vision of elegance and youthful charm with evening wrap caught high about the pretty face. Such sightly shapes were too much a commonplace of their deliberate and self-sufficient days, and always passed in haste; as young blood does ever, irrationally enough, having so much time before it, so little patience . . .

So, though she knew them for a pack of greedy scandal scavengers, and conceived every eye among them to be regardful of her and all her shifts to deceive them spent for naught, not one who observed her guessed with what agitation she was a-quake, what unrelenting urgency whipped on her feet till they all but stumbled in their eagerness to find her sanctuary behind locked doors, where she might ease off at last the tension of self-control, pillow her sore and aching head, and give range to the pent tempest of emotions brewed by love thwarted and chagrined, faith confounded, dreams done shamefully to death . . .

Fleeting free of that gauntlet, she gave a sigh to find herself in the quiet corridor leading to her apartment. How good it was to think she would in another minute be alone, what an inspiration had been hers when, looking forward to an evening long drawn out, she had given her maid liberty till morning!

She passed the door through which she once had ventured to discover Nelly Marquis lying in a faint brought about by Lynn's cruelty. . . . And now what would become of that one? Whither had she turned in her flight? with what hope of asylum or immunity? A hapless creature beating blindly through the night, a landbird swept to sea by an off-shore gale, questing what it might never hope to find . . .

Lucinda slipped into her sitting-room, turned the key, found the switchbox near the door, and in an abrupt blaze of illumination stood, startled beyond speech, face

to face with the woman the riddle of whose fate had been riding her imagination.

One of Nelly's hands was planted flat against the wall; but this support helped not at all to abate the vicious racking of her body by nerves deranged. The other, a begrimed fist, was fumbling at her mouth. Those eyes whose haunted beauty had first laid claim to one's humanity were now—their blazing madness of a short hour since dispelled—black pools of pathos in a face whose chalkiness was runneled by tears and framed in hair like tarred rope unravelled. Her dress of hackneyed smartness was bedraggled, the skirt marked by knees that in some fall had ground into loam. The black satin slippers were pale with dust, and the openwork stockings, which boasted two great tears as well.

In that first flash of affrighted recognition, Lucinda started back to the door and fumbled for the key, but had yet to find it when the woman plunged down to grovel at her feet, catching at her knees, lifting up a face of torment, supplicating against teeth that chattered as if with an acute ague.

"O Mrs. Druce, Mrs. Druce! I'm all right now, I am, I swear I am! Forgive me, and for God's sake don't turn me out, don't call the police!"

Still frightened and mistrustful, Lucinda yet held her hand on the knob. "What do you want?" she asked in a voice that shook.

"Just to talk to you a minute . . . Don't be afraid . . . "

"I'm not afraid," Lucinda lied. Nevertheless, in compassion and dawning reassurance, she stooped, freed her skirts from the clutching hands, and stepped back. "Get up," she said, watchful. "Tell me plainly what you want . . . "

The woman scrambled to her feet again, cringing and fawning. "I had to come," she protested. "I didn't know

where else to go, I had to know. Mrs. Druce: please tell me, is he . . . Did I hurt him bad?"

"Desperately," Lucinda replied, wondering at the reserve of fortitude which enabled her to speak with such composure. "Whether he'll live or not we don't know yet. He was unconscious when I left, before the doctor came."

"You left him that way? You didn't wait to find out! O my God!"

"Are you reproaching me?" Lucinda retorted in amazement—"as if it were I who shot your husband!"

"*My* husband!" Nelly shrilled. "It's yours I'm talking about, it's Mr. Druce. It's not knowing how bad I hurt him that's driving me crazy . . . not meaning to harm even his little finger, I hope to die! I didn't hardly know who he was, that time while we was fighting . . . " She drove her knuckles against her mouth again and sunk teeth into them till pain helped her reassert self-control. "I didn't know what I was doing!" she mumbled between sobs——"I didn't know."

"Do you know now?"

"Oh, I do, I do! I'm all right now, honestly I am. I know what I've done and what—what I've got to pay for doing it. But I don't care!" She jerked up her chin, bravado fighting with fear in her eyes. "Lynn only got what was coming to him. I warned him often enough, time after time I told him how it was all bound to end if he kept on like he was doing; but he wouldn't listen, he'd just laugh and tell me what I could do if I didn't like his ways. . . . I don't mean I threatened him, Mrs. Druce. It wasn't like that. I don't believe I ever dreamed of striking back at him before today. I always thought it would be some other woman would do it, somebody that didn't love him like I did, and couldn't stand being treated like a dog, just because he got tired —I always thought somebody like that would make Lynn pay, I never thought I'd have the nerve. But today, all

at once, I couldn't seem to stand it any longer . . . And when I looked in at that window and saw you alone with him, and him holding you in his arms, even if you did try to make him quit . . . But I'm not sorry! Lynn never treated any woman so mean, and I guess it was right his punishment should come from me. I ain't a bit sorry, I hope he dies. . . . Do you—do you think he will?"

To the implicit hope that thus gave vaunted impenitence the lie, Lucinda returned, in a low tone and against her wish, the one word, "Probably . . . " and saw the woman quail and writhe away, twisting her thin, graceful hands into each other till their knuckles shone dead white through the tortured skin.

"I don't care," she wailed—"I don't! And anyway, it wasn't about him, it was Mr. Druce I came here to find out about. I couldn't go away without knowing . . . He's been such a prince to me, a regular prince, and I never meant him any harm. It just makes me sick to think . . . " She swung passionately back to Lucinda. "Won't you please, *please* tell me how bad he's hurt?"

"Not much—a flesh wound in the arm——"

"Thank God it wasn't worse!" Nelly drooped heavily against the wall, with a pathetic smile testifying to her relief of mind. "I'd never have forgiven myself, never . . . "

Profound fatigue seemed to be overcoming her. The quavering murmurs failed upon her lips, her eyes closed, her head sagged toward one shoulder.

"Are you in love with him, then?" Lucinda demanded inexorably. "Is Bel in love with you?"

Startled, Nelly stood away from the wall, with a hysterical note in the laugh that scorned this notion. "No, no, no, no!" she cried. "He isn't that sort. You ought to know he isn't. I don't know what the trouble was between you two, but I'll tell the world it wasn't on account of any

other woman . . . It wasn't as if Mr. Druce didn't have his chance, either; any time he'd wanted it he could have had it with me, any time!"

"Yet you tell me you're not in love with him!"

"You don't have to be in love in the picture business . . . " The fugitive, twisted smile vanished away, the lustreless eyed stared into space. "Mostly it's better if you aren't. If you are, it's likely to turn out like it did with me and Lynn. If a girl wants to get on, she can't afford to care for anybody, only herself. It hasn't mattered much to me what happened, since Lynn . . . But Mr. Druce never as much as held my hand."

"Wouldn't you tell me that anyway?"

"It's God's honest truth."

The statement was made without spirit, as one of simple, provable fact. And for all her memories of Bel's misconduct, Lucinda believed.

Wearily the woman began to pull about her shoulders a wrinkled, sleazy wrap.

"Guess I'd better be going," she said with eyes averted. "Thank you for being so kind. I'm glad Mr. Druce wasn't much hurt, and I wish you'd tell him I'm sorry for everything. I didn't mean to do it, but I just went crazy when I saw you and Lynn together, and him making love to you. I don't remember much about what happened, but I guess it must've been pretty awful for you, and I'm sorry.

Continuing to avoid Lucinda's eyes, she plucked at her cloak once more and moved toward the door; but faltered on finding that Lucinda stood in her way and didn't offer to budge. "I'd better go," she iterated uneasily.

"Where?"

"I don't know." Nelly wagged a head of desolate uncertainty. "There isn't any place I can think of now, they wouldn't find me. Only . . I'm sorry about Lynn, and I'm not going to suffer any more on his account unless I have to. So it's up to me to be on my way."

"Wait a minute, please." Remaining between the girl and the door, Lucinda pursued: "I want to know how you got in here. How did you get back to the hotel so quickly?"

"From Beverly Hills, you mean? Oh, I had luck and caught a trolley without having to wait. They make pretty good time, you know. And then, when I got here . . . I wanted to go up to my room and get some money. . . I was afraid to come in the front way, I thought maybe they'd telephoned or something, so I tried the side door. They don't lock that till about nine o'clock. And just as I came in, I noticed the chambermaid unlocking this door, and it come over me like a flash you'd probably be coming home pretty soon, and I was worried about Mr. Druce; so I slipped in while she was in your bedroom, and hid behind that chair there till she went out again."

"But what if they've locked the side door since? It must be after nine now. You won't be able to leave except by way of the office."

"I guess I'll have to take my chances . . . " She bent upon Lucinda a look of flickering defiance. "Anyhow, what do you care?"

"I don't like to think of your being caught."

"Why?"

"I don't know, unless it's because I think you've been punished enough already. You'd better wait and rest for a while, at least till the house quiets down. And perhaps we can think of some way . . . Don't you think you'd better trust me?"

For another instant suspicious eyes searched Lucinda's, then with a half-nod the girl wilted into a chair. "All right," she acquiesced with the passivity of a child chastened by terror—"just's you say, Mrs. Druce. Only, I don't see why you're being so good to me."

Lucinda had no answer to that. Her motive was not more obscure to that muddled mind than to her own.

Unless, of course, it had to do with that enduring image of the bird storm-beaten, weary of wing and bewildered by the dark, risking the debatable mercy of mankind in its stark necessity . . .

She stood pitiful, contemplating the creature who huddled in the chair, shivering, whimpering a little, gnawing her knuckles, with the dazed eyes of an animal hunted to its last gasp seeking to probe the fearful ambiguity of the future. A murderess by intention, whom the word of any moment might prove a murderess in fact. . . . And one couldn't condemn or reproach her, one couldn't shrink from her because of the crime that stained her hands, one couldn't even win one's own consent to send her out to chance the retributon she had invited.

Incomprehensible the alchemy of the human heart! Lucinda was making up her mind to help a sinner circumvent justice . . .

"Tell me something," she said, with no more preface: "You've been calling me Mrs. Druce. How did you learn that was my name? Did Mr. Druce tell you?"

Only the hand of the girl moved in a sign of dissent, and her lips to shape the words: "It was Lynn told me."

"Lynn!"

"Mr. Druce never said as much as a word about you. I don't believe he knows I know now. I thought he didn't want me to know, so I never let on; but of course I did know, all along."

"Lynn told you when——?"

"That time you found me on the floor, you know. I guess I ought to apologize for the way I treated you, but I was all upset, I hated you on account of what Lynn had told you about me and all."

"I don't think I blame you—now."

"You wouldn't 've, then, if you'd been through what I'd been through that afternoon . . . Lynn didn't let me know he was coming, or send his name in or anything, he just walked in through the window while I was getting

dressed to go out. He said I'd got to clear out, go back home, where I come from in the East. He said if I didn't I'd spoil everything for him, if you ever found out about me you wouldn't have any more to do with him, and then where'd be his chance of getting in with New York society people like you trained with. He took out a hundred dollars and put it on the bureau and said I'd got to take it and go home and he'd send me fifty dollars every week. I said I wouldn't, and he said I would if he had to ship me East on a stretcher. I forget what I said then, but I was pretty wild, I guess, and he hit me, and I don't remember anything after that, except waking up to find Lynn gone and you taking care of me."

She jumped in the chair, cried out shrilly, and clapped a hand over her heart when the telephone sounded a peremptory call. Lucinda, answering, heard the voice of her chauffeur: he had called up Mr. Summerlad's, somebody there had told him Miss Lee had gone home already and wouldn't want him again that night, and he wanted to make sure that was all right.

"Yes, Ben," Lucinda assented, "it's quite all right. I left that word for you, but . . . just a minute . . . I may change my mind."

"It'll be all right with me, Miss Lee, if you want to go out again."

"Yes, Ben, I know; and thank you. But if I decide to use the car again tonight, I'll drive it myself—alone, you understand. If you wouldn't mind bringing it to the side door of the hotel in about an hour and leaving it there . . . No; don't wait for me, I may be delayed; just leave the car and go home. I'll take it to the garage when I'm through with it."

When Lucinda hung up she found Nelly slewed round in the chair and watching with darkly doubting eyes, to which she responded, with a slight smile: "That was inspiration. While Ben was talking, it occurred to me, the only possible way for you to escape would be in

somebody's car. So I've arranged to let you steal mine. You can leave it wherever you think it safe to get aboard a train. You can drive, of course?" Nelly nodded. "Then if you'll come into my bedroom, you can lie down and rest while I find you a change of clothes. I'm afraid, if the police get a description of you dressed as you are, you wouldn't have much chance . . . "

Before she could surmise or move to defeat the girl's intention, Nelly had caught one of her hands and was weeping and slavering over it.

"You're so sweet and good to me!" she sobbed. "I can't make out what makes you so kind!"

"I think," Lucinda said, with gaze remote—"I think *I* am beginning to understand . . . "

XLI

IN an interlude of difficulty to beggar all believing, response to Lucinda's forbearance all at once swept like a great wind over those treacherous emotional shallows, kicking up their still unsettled dregs of hysteria, storming in wild squalls of gratitude, remorse and shame, driving shoreward that frail, crank pleasure-craft which was the soul of Nelly Marquis, leaving it at the last stranded in a slough of self-pity and abasement, where it rested in maudlin wreckage, weeping, lamenting, calling out upon its shabby gods for that they had forsaken it.

Early in this scene Lucinda made shift to get the woman, half-leading, half-dragging her, into the bedchamber where the seizure might spend itself unheard by passers in the public corridor. But for a tedious while after she had persuaded her to lie down she made no headway toward stemming her transports; and sitting on the side of the bed, suffering Nelly to cling to her hands, seeking to pacify her whenever in a lull she could make words tell, learned enough from her maunderings to sicken one with the very thought of love.

As if what had been had left her in need of this last disenchantment! . . .

Sheer persistence in the end proved tranquillizing, the woman ceased to toss and writhe continually, her communications became more lucid. But she wouldn't hear of being left alone for a nap, she wouldn't release Lucinda's hands, she wouldn't heed suggestions that it might perhaps be well for her to get up and change to the clothing which Lucinda had provided. Time enough for that, she argued, when Mr. Druce had been and gone. Maybe Lynn hadn't been as much hurt as Lucinda believed. If he hadn't, he could be depended upon to move heaven

and earth to save his fair name in the esteem of picture fans from the odium that must attach to it should the news get out that he had been shot up by a discarded wife. Anyway, they couldn't tell anything for certain till Mr. Druce had kept his promise to report the surgeon's verdict.

Besides, if it came to the worst, if it turned out that Nelly would have to cut and run for it, the later the hour at which she left the hotel the better, the fewer people there would be about to see her go . . .

It had been agreed that it would never do for Lucinda to ask for the key to the side door. But if she chose to stroll out through the lobby, accompanied by a young woman well cloaked, the chances were that the latter would pass unquestioned as some friend who had dropped in to spend the evening with her.

"But are you quite sure you feel strong and well enough to drive the car yourself?" Lucinda misdoubted for perhaps the hundredth time, though for the first openly.

The woman on the bed gave her hand a small jerk of petulance. "Don't you worry your head about me, Mrs. Druce," she insisted. "I'll be all right. I can drive any make of car there is, and I know all the roads out of Los Angeles like a book. Why, when me and Lynn was living together, we didn't hardly ever have any use for a chauffeur."

"Where will you go, then?"

"Up North, I guess, by the Coastal Highway. I can make Santa Barbara by morning easy. But I don't know, maybe I might go right through to Frisco. That's where I want to get, you know. It ought to be easy to lie low in a town like Frisco. Anyhow, wherever I decide, I'll shoot you a wire first thing, telling you where I left the car. I only wish I didn't have to take it, somehow it don't seem right. But there! maybe I won't have to . . . And unless I do, there wouldn't be any sense in my leaving all my clothes here and everything, would there? What time is it now? A person would think Mr.

Druce wouldn't be much longer, wouldn't they? I suppose you wouldn't want to call up Lynn's house and ask . . ."

"I'd rather not."

"I kind of thought you'd feel like that about it. It would look too much like worrying about Lynn, wouldn't it?" Lucinda made no reply, and after a moment of dumb staring at the ceiling a shadow of complacency modified Nelly's fretful look. "I guess it's all over with Lynn now, as far as you're concerned, isn't it?"

"Yes," Lucinda said with the slowness that spells restraint—"as far as I'm concerned, it's all over."

"I'm awfully sorry," the girl asserted, her voice in turn carrying the colour of complacency—"I mean, sorry for you. You must've been awfully stuck on Lynn."

"Yes . . . " To offset a choke in her voice Lucinda added with a hard laugh: "Awfully!"

"It's terrible to have to give up a man like Lynn . . . Don't *I* know!"

Lucinda bluntly changed the subject. "What will you do now?" she asked—"I mean, after this blows over. Will you go on with your picture work in the East?"

"I don't know . . . I guess not . . . Nobody's likely to give me another chance . . . Lynn isn't going to be able to keep the truth from leaking out inside the business, of course; and he's terribly popular, his friends will take good care I don't get another job. I guess I've gone and fixed it for myself in the picture business, all right, no matter what . . . Unless, of course, I might maybe change my name or something."

"But this picture my husband is making: he won't be able to go on with it with you out of the cast, I presume."

Nelly laughed outright. "I guess that won't worry Mr. Druce a terrible lot. You don't suppose he cares two whoops what happens to that picture now, do you?"

"Why not? Why did he start making it, unless . . . ?"

"Why don't you know, Mrs. Druce? I'd 've thought

you'd 've been wise to that dodge all along. All Mr. Druce went into the film business for was to be near you."

"You believe that?"

"Why!"—the girl laughed again—"it's just as plain as paint to anybody in the know; I mean, anybody that knows you two are married but living separate on account of some row or something. All Mr. Druce cares about pictures a person could put in their eye and never know it. He just wanted a good excuse to be near you and take care of you in case anything . . . like tonight . . . or if he thought you was beginning to take Lynn too seriously or anything . . . Anyway, that's how I figured it from the very first. He had it doped it would cramp Lynn's style to see me around the studio all the time, and maybe make him break it off with you. And so did I. Only I guess neither of us guessed how hard Lynn had fallen for you."

"You haven't told me how my husband happened to engage you."

"Well, he just went after me and wouldn't take no for an answer. He's like that, you know. Of course, I don't know what the trouble was between you two, but I don't see how you ever stood out against a man like him, Mrs. Druce."

"Where were you when he found you?"

"Back home. You see, after Lynn gave me that hundred . . . and what happened . . . I was afraid to stay in Hollywood, I didn't know what else he might do to me. And besides, I simply couldn't stand seeing you stepping out with him all the time, it made me simply wild. So I went right back to Findlay."

"Findlay?"

"The place in Ohio where my people live."

"And that's where Mr. Druce found you?"

"I'd only just got back when a man came to town, Mr. Roberts he said his name was, and said he'd got me a swell offer to go back to the Coast and act for a new company just starting. I kind of thought there was some-

thing fishy about it, because I never was much in pictures; and why should they send somebody all the way to Findlay to get me when they could 've got plenty just as good right here in Hollywood? Anyhow, I was afraid of Lynn, so I said nothing doing. Next I knew, Mr. Druce himself come to see me and said I'd got to go back to Hollywood with him and make pictures and I could write my own contract. Of course, as soon's I heard his name, I tumbled to what it was all about; and I thought if you got to seeing a lot of your husband you'd give Lynn the air . . . chuck him, I mean . . . and maybe . . . Ah! *I* don't know . . . "

She was quiet for a moment, in wide-eyed, wondering abstraction. "Somehow I never got over being crazy about Lynn, you know," she said in a quieter tone than she had yet used—"not even when he treated me meanest."

In this pensive mood she mused on: "You know, sometimes I think it's all wrong the way women, like you and me, take everything a man wants to hand out to us, just to hold him. They keep telling you it's the only way; but the way it looks to me, it hardly ever works . . . I mean, unless the man's crazy about you, like Mr. Druce . . .

"Of course, I know it isn't any of my business, Mrs. Druce, but I haven't got any hard feelings towards you on account of Lynn and all, not any more, and I'm perfectly sincere when I say *I* think you'll be making one big mistake if you don't make it up with Mr. Druce as soon's ever you can now . . . "

The house telephone came to Lucinda's rescue: Mr. Druce was calling, if Miss Lee would be kind enough to overlook the lateness of the hour . . .

Lucinda promised to get rid of Bel as soon as she could, and in return exacted the girl's promise to rest quietly and not worry. Then she shut herself out into the sitting-room, and had almost immediately to answer the door.

Bel's light motor-coat hung from his shoulders with empty sleeves, by which device he was able to make no parade of the fact that his right arm was in a sling. His features were drawn and grey, his speech slow with weariness, but his eyes keen, steady and (Lucinda made sure, looking sharply) wholly unsentimental; while his greeting, characteristically abrupt—"Still up, eh?"—was accompanied by ironical recognition of her unchanged evening costume.

"I waited up for you," Lucinda replied sufficiently to both words and look. "How's your arm?"

"Nothing to brag about, but no worse than I thought. A bit stiff and sore, that's all."

"You look fearfully tired, Bel. Won't you sit down?"

Irony again tinged his flying smile. "No, thanks. Won't stay but a minute. I promised, so here I am. But I'm dog-tired, and as soon as I've turned in my report, I'll cut along."

"Well . . . ?"

"He's got one chance in a thousand to pull through. Say what you like about that young woman—she can shoot. Only one shot went wrong, merely smashed his shoulder. One of the others just missed his heart, the third drilled through his lungs. Wouldn't give a great deal for all the show he's got."

Grim watchfulness was rewarded by her slight start, a swift darkening of Lucinda's eyes, but no flinching, after an instant a slow nod, nothing more. "Nothing to say?" Bellamy demanded in pitiless humour.

"Thank you for letting me know."

"And that's all?"

"Was there something you expected me to say, Bel? Sorry to disappoint you . . . "

"Well: you knew the fellow better than I——"

"If it interests you, you may as well know now what I didn't—not before tonight."

"You didn't know Summerlad was married——?"

"If another man dared ask me that question, I think even you would resent it."

"Perhaps. Daresay it's the husband's astigmatic point of view. However, I didn't mean to be offensive."

"Do you seriously ask me to believe that, Bel?"

"Damn it, Linda! you always did have the faculty of putting me in the wrong."

"Isn't it more true that you haven't yet mastered the faculty of always putting yourself in the right?"

"Perhaps we'd better let it go at that. One thing's certain, I'm none too happy in my efforts to express myself tonight. Daresay I'd better clear out before I make things worse . . . " Nevertheless he delayed. "That girl . . . she got away. Not a trace . . . "

"Are they—is anybody looking——?"

"The police have got that job in hand. I had rather a time with them, you know. They didn't fancy my story at all, at first, couldn't see why the devil I had let Nelly escape. The circumstance that she'd shot me in the arm didn't seem to carry any weight; in fact, I gathered they didn't put it beyond me to shoot myself in the right arm to divert suspicion. Only one thing saved me: Nelly had thoughtfully lost her handbag outside the window, with an extra clip of cartridges in it."

"She must have meant to make sure . . . I mean, it wasn't an affair of impulse, then?"

"Oh, she'd had in mind what she meant to do for a long time. I don't know how long, but she let a hint fall the other night, when she'd had a bit more drink than she needed, and I spent the best part of the evening trying to talk her out of it. She fobbed me off with a half-promise in the end; but I wasn't satisfied. And tonight, when she wasn't on hand to keep a dinner appointment, and one of the bellhops told me he'd seen her boarding a trolley for Beverly Hills . . . Well: my chauffeur says we broke all existing records, getting out to Summerlad's. Why we weren't arrested neither of us knows. Lucky . . . "

Bel's words trailed off into a thoughtful mumble, he seemed momentarily lost in study of the rug on which he stood, then roused and put his hand to the door-knob.

"If it matters," he announced—"possibly you'd care to know—we've telegraphed Summerlad's people in his home town, Terre Haute——his mother and sister. The family name appears to be Slade. We thought he ought to have them with him. . . ."

"'We'?"

"Zinn and I."

"You told Mr. Zinn?"

"Called him up first thing. Naturally. Nobody had a better right to know what had happened, holding Summerlad under contract as he does. He came right out, calling himself bad names for being in the picture business, and took charge. It was mostly thanks to him I was able to get away as soon as I did."

"Does he know the full story, Bel?"

"All that matters. But your part's still a dead secret between the four of us—including my chauffeur and Summerlad's Jap. I think those two have been well enough paid . . . It remains to get hold of your man and make him forget he drove you out there for dinner and didn't bring you home. If you'll give me his address . . ."

"Perhaps I can attend to that better than you, Bel; without making it necessary to explain how you happen to be interested, I mean."

"You won't forget? This affair will be all over town before morning."

"I'll call Ben up at his home as soon as you've gone."

"Very well, then. I presume that brings us to good-night."

"But Bel . . ." Bellamy reclosed the door and turned back with weary patience. "About that poor girl . . ."

He looked startled. "That sounds like pity."

"Can one think of her in any other spirit? Have you any notion what will happen to her?"

"Nothing's going to happen to her—if I can find her before the police do."

"You don't mean you'd help her get away, Bel?"

"If it takes every dollar I've got in the world. Do you realize what it means if she's caught and put on trial—either for murder or attempted murder, as it turns out—in a case that's going to get the publicity this is bound to? Do you imagine it will be possible then to keep your name out of it? She's bound to tell her story in self-defense; and inasmuch as she's good-looking enough to be acquitted on one pretext or another, in all probability, the chances are in another six months she'll be starring in a film based on a re-hash of this pretty little affair."

"Then you will help me? I can count on you, Bel?"

"Help you?"

"Help get her away."

Bellamy started excitedly. "Mean to say you know where Nelly is?"

"She's here, Bel. She came straight to me, half-mad with anxiety on your account. It seems she's grateful to you for kindness——"

"And you didn't throw her out?" Bel interrupted, staring.

"She made me understand . . . And she was so bewildered, so terrified . . . I couldn't blame her, Bel; and I couldn't have put her out in any event."

"In there?" Bellamy nodded toward the bedchamber and, receiving a nod in reply, strode quickly to the door and threw it open.

The room was a pocket of darkness and, when the lights had been turned on, proved to be tenantless.

The nightly breeze from the hills was bellying the curtains at one of the windows that opened on the street. Lucinda ran to it and leaned out.

No sign of the car that by her order had been left standing before the side door, nearly an hour since . . .

XLII

LUCINDA slept that night—and that she slept at all crossed her presentiment—but fitfully, in spells of profound and wasting lethargy broken by wretched watches of half-waking dread under the dominion of the incubus that agonized her dreams, that phantasm of the land-bird lost, spending its slender strength against the cruel vasts of night and sea and storm . . .

Toward morning exhaustion claimed her absolutely, sponging out every care, and for some hours her slumbers were unbroken. But she woke up as it were against her will, heavy of heart and without sense of having rested.

Sluggish resentment crawled in her mind, that she should feel so worn and old whose first moments after sleep were as a rule her happiest, when she would lie serene, luxuriating in whole refreshment and with normal optimism very like a child's looking forward to the day, making plans to fill in with small pleasures every hour that wasn't to be devoted to her work.

There was still the feel of immaturity in the day, the chilly souvenir of night which so frequently renders the mornings of Southern California sickly, before the sun finds strength enough to burn away the high fog that, like a thief in the dark, is wont to steal in after sundown from the sea.

What, then, had awakened her so far in advance of the customary hour?

Something hideous and hateful skulking like a torpid snake in the shadows beyond the threshold of consciousness, some foul shape that she instinctively shrank from calling up . . .

The bedside clock struck nine, and Lucinda started up in a flutter excited by the thought that she would yet another time be late and so afford fresh reason for dissension with her director . . . then sank back to her pillow, cringing from memories that came trooping in the wake of the reminder that she was to know no more of Barry Nolan in her life . . .

No more of Nolan, no more of Nelly, no more of Lynn . . . no more of Love . . .

With a convulsive movement she flung over in the bed and lay almost prone, her face snuggled into bare arms whose pure lustre lent fire to the crimson that glowed in a lunette of cheek, the one ear visible, even in her neck's sleek loveliness.

Things that Nelly had told her, resting on that very bed, plain tales of the life that Lynn by preference had led, related in the flat and toneless accents of emotional prostration, therefore the more likely to be free from overstatement; things Lynn himself had owned inadvertently or injudiciously at the urge of vanity craving greater prestige in her sight; things that she knew of her own experience with the man, little circumstances of their association that had threatened its harmony, things she hadn't liked and wilfully had been blind to, denied, or disbelieved: all swam up from the deeps of memory to float like scum upon the surface of her consciousness.

Lonely and restless, starving for affection and all too eager to snatch at shadow and proclaim it substance, self-dedicated victim of a ready-made infatuation . . .

And she had called that Love!

What dishonor, what humiliation, what reproach!

What an escape! and at what cost! . . . a cost not yet all paid, and which if she would she might not pay alone, but must see others pay in part for her, Nelly and Lynn perhaps with their lives, Bel too in his way, in another way Zinn . . . all called upon to lay down

things they held dear that she might have her lesson, that she might learn Love is never lightly to be won, no, nor put by, either . . .

In the room adjoining she could hear her maid quietly moving about, tidying up, with presently a chirrup of the telephone, then a guarded mumble as the woman answered.

She was hanging up when Lucinda, dragging on a négligé, flung open the communicating door.

The maid said Mr. Zinn had called up, and gaped to see Lucinda's glance grow dull and the spirit of her entrance pass abruptly into apathy.

Sinking wearily against the door-frame, she desired to know what Zinn had wanted.

"He asked if you was up yet, ma'm, and when I told him no, he said it didn't matter, would I kindly take the message, he couldn't keep his date with you to look at the rushes today, and maybe not tomorrow, he'd give you a ring 'safternoon and let you know."

"Very well," Lucinda said without interest . . . "I'll have my bath, please."

Waiting for the water to be drawn, she wandered to a window. The high fog still held the day against the sun, a dense, cold pall of grey, as flat as a metal plate, closing out the blue, closing in an atmosphere lifeless and bleak.

She thought of Lynn fighting for his life, perhaps losing, perhaps already still in defeat.

And Nelly . . . at whose fate one could only guess . . .

She recalled that bright hour of sunset, so clear and warm, through which she had motored in gladness toward his arms whom she had called her beloved, that hour in the dread light of this so weirdly unreal, so inconceivably remote; and the old, embittered plaint of Abdu-el-Yezdi found a melancholy echo in her heart:

"Strange that Life's Registrar should call
That day a day, this day a day." . . .

Bel came in about ten, by that many sleepless, active, anxious hours more jaded than when she had seen him last. Road-dust powdered his face and hands and lay caked in the folds of his coat, and he carried the arm in the sling with more open confession of acute distress. Lucinda herself opened for him, and he met her eyes with a short nod.

"You've found her, Bel? Where?"

He glanced round the room, caught sight of the maid through the open door to the bedchamber, and indicated her with a brusque jerk of his head.

Lucinda called the woman. "You've had no breakfast?" she added.

"No time. Been on the road all night. Just got in."

"Let me order you something . . . "

"Well . . . I would be glad of a cup of coffee—nothing else, thanks."

Lucinda sent the maid on the errand, and as soon as they were alone gave intuition voice: "Bel: something has happened to her? she's dead?"

With a weary nod, Bel dropped into a chair. "We got as far as Santa Barbara without picking up a sign," he said. "It was getting daylight then, and I made up my mind we'd taken the wrong road, that Nelly had lied or changed her mind about the way she meant to go. But she hadn't. When we turned back we found her . . . what had been her . . . "

He bent forward with his sound elbow on his knee, covering his eyes as if to hide their reminiscent horror.

"There had been an accident?"

"She ran your car off the road at a turn and over a low cliff to a rocky beach. Must have been killed instantly. If so, it was a mercy, for nobody had noticed the wreck till a few minutes before we turned up. I

happened to catch sight of the crowd on the beach and made my chauffeur stop . . . "

He didn't look up, and neither spoke again till the maid returned. Then Lucinda made another pretext to get rid of her for another while, apparently to her considerable annoyance.

"How much does she know?" Bellamy asked, as the woman took herself off with an aggrieved flounce.

"There's been nothing for her to know, Bel," Lucinda returned without resentment.

"I didn't mean . . . I was merely wondering if she knew where you were expecting to dine last night. She must have helped you dress."

"I don't recall saying . . . "

"Better give her a good present and make her understand a tight mouth pays."

"Very well."

Bel sipped his coffee, frowning. "Heard anything from your friends the Lontaines this morning?"

"Not yet. Fanny will call up, of course, or come round to see me as soon as she hears."

"Risky to wait. Better get hold of her at once, let her hear about this business first of all from you, and tell her she's got to protect you if she has to lie like Sapphira."

"But surely we can count on Fanny's discretion!"

"Can we?" Bel's grin was skeptical. "I'm not so sure. Nolan knew last night you'd been due at Summerlad's for dinner. Told Zinn he had his information from Mrs. Lontaine."

"Barry Nolan! I don't understand . . . "

"Only know what Nolan told Zinn. Stopped in at the studio just now, saw Zinn for a few minutes. . . . By the way"—Bel's manner was studiously casual—"it may interest you to know, the latest reports say Summerlad's holding his own."

"I am glad," Lucinda said simply. And Bel's eyes

wavered under her level regard, lightly charged as it was with contempt. "You were telling me about Nolan . . . "

"Zinn says he telephoned all over Los Angeles last night trying to locate Nolan—because he and Summerlad had always been so close—but had no luck till about three this morning, when Nolan got home and found Zinn's message waiting for him. Then he hurried over to the bungalow—with at least three sheets in the wind, according to Zinn—and the first question he asked was where you'd been when the shooting took place. Zinn swore you hadn't been there, and the Jap backed him up nobly . . . But there you are, if you're asking for proof that your friend Fanny tells everything she knows."

Lucinda coloured resentfully. "I am sure," she insisted, "Fanny never dreamed of hurting me when she told Mr. Nolan—whatever it was she did tell him. But it's easy enough to find out . . . "

She took up the telephone, but had to wait, receiver at ear, several minutes before the Lontaine's number answered. Then a voice with a drowsy sound, like a tired and husky imitation of Fanny's: "Yes? Hello! who is it?" And when Lucinda made herself known a brief stammer prefaced a shift to honeyed accents: "Oh! is it you, Cindy darling? Heavens! what time is it?"

Lucinda named the hour, heard Fanny give a smothered exclamation, and added: "Did I wake you up?"

"I was simply dead to the world when the telephone rang," Fanny declared with an equivocal giggle. "The poor dear eyes are hardly open even now."

"I'm so sorry, dear. I supposed of course . . . Is Harry there?"

The reply came readily and without suggestion of uncertainty: "Why, no, darling: he isn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Quite——"

"I mean," Lucinda persisted, in some perplexity, "if

you've just waked up, you've hardly had time to find out."

"Oh!" Fanny interrupted herself with an uneasy laugh. "Oh, but I know he isn't! I . . . he . . . I mean to say, darling, Harry must have gone out quite early. I mean . . . O dear!" An audible yawn and then an apologetic noise. "I'm simply drugged with sleepiness, Cindy. What I'm trying to say is, I was awake when Harry left the house, but went to sleep again. Have you tried the studio? If he isn't there, I'm sure I haven't the remotest notion where he can be." Then with a quite unmistakable accent of apprehension: "Why, darling? is something the matter?"

"I'll explain when I see you," Lucinda temporized—"if you wouldn't mind running round to the hotel when you've had your breakfast."

"Mind, darling! I'll simply fly into my clothes, be there in no time at all."

The meditative expression with which Lucinda put the telephone aside drew from Bellamy the direct question: What had Fanny said?

"It wasn't what she said, it was the funny, embarrassed way she said it. As a general thing, Fanny's as transparently candid as—as a plate of glass."

Bellamy made a doubting mouth. "You're pretty thick, you two," he supposed—"you tell her everything?"

Irritation in a gust shook Lucinda till her voice shook in sympathy.

"Really, Bel! you seem fairly possessed by desire to believe my life out here full of things an honest woman would want to hide."

"No," Bellamy dissented slowly. "But I do seriously believe—in fact, know—you haven't always been altogether discreet, you've done things here, without a moment's thought, you'd have hesitated a long time before committing yourself to at home."

"You forget this is now my home. What Fifth Avenue

holds inconvenable isn't anything to bother about on Sunset Boulevard."

"Well . . . if life has taught me anything, Linda, it is that it never does to trust too much to the good will of one's friends. We're all too exclusively creatures of selfishness: self always comes before the claims others may have or impose on us. It pleases us no end to believe our friends so devoted that they'd put our interests before their own; but when the test comes, as a general thing, we find out we've been self-deluded."

"How funny, Bel: *you* philosophizing!"

"That isn't philosophy, it's common sense based on observation of the underside of human nature. . . . I'm not blaming you for clinging to your friends, or standing up for them, I'm only anxious you shan't suffer from finding them out."

"I fancy I know Fanny, at least," Lucinda retorted severely.

"You think you do. And I don't dispute your superior knowledge of every side of her but one, the side she shows only to the men she picks out to flirt with."

"For example, yourself."

"Exactly."

Lucinda openly enjoyed an instant of malicious amusement. "Do you really believe you're learning to see through women at last, Bel?"

"You'll admit I've served a long apprenticeship"—Bellamy gave a deprecating grunt—"enough to have learned something."

"And now you're warning me against the wiles of my best friend!"

"I'm warning you against all such adventurers . . . Oh, yes! the Lontaines are just that, both of them. Chances are they haven't got a dollar between them they didn't get from you. Neither did Mrs. Fanny set her cap for me just to keep in practice, she gets enough of that

in other quarters. No: she had another motive, and it wasn't any way altruistic."

"What was it, then?"

"Think I can leave that to your intelligence. I've never noticed you were—one might say—dense concerning the psychology of your sex, Linda."

Indignation threatened to find expression in a rush of tears, but Lucinda winked them back.

"I do wish you wouldn't try to make me angry with you——"

"I'm only trying to tell you, one can't afford to trust anybody in this world except those who have nothing to gain through cultivating one's friendship."

"—Just now, when I've so much to be grateful to you for, when you're doing—have done so much to save me from the consequences of my folly——"

"Ah! you realize that."

"Both my folly"—Lucinda nodded gravely—"and all you're doing to repair it. So this once I won't resent your calling my friends adventurers."

Bel chuckled as he got up. "Because you know in your heart that's what they are, neither more nor less. . . . Think I'll be getting along now. I want sleep badly, and I must stop in at the studio first and have a word with Lontaine, if he's there. And then I need Nolan's address."

"You're going to see him. Do you think that wise?"

"I won't permit him to spread gossip about your being with Summerlad last night."

"Do you think he'll admit your right to dictate?"

"I don't imagine it will be news to him that you're my wife, if that's what you mean. Your friend the actor seems to have been tolerably busy crowing about his conquest of Mrs. Bellamy Druce—always, of course, in strictest confidence. Zinn knew all about you before I appeared on the scene. And Nolan was Summerlad's bosom pal . . . ."

The thrust told shrewdly, rewarding Bel with a fugitive moment of sardonic satisfaction. Then the courage with which Lucinda took punishment exacted his admiration.

"But I'm afraid," she said quietly, "you won't have much success with Nolan, even if he does recognize your right to interfere."

"How so?"

"He has too little reason to feel well-disposed toward me."

"On account of your quarrel with him yesterday . . . "

"I didn't know you knew."

"Who in Hollywood doesn't, do you suppose?" Bel snorted. "Gossip travels like grass fire, out here. I heard five different versions yesterday, myself, before your cameraman told mine what I imagine was the approximate truth."

"Then I presume you know, as well, about my new arrangement, with Mr. Zinn taking over the production?"

"Yes?"

The single syllable of assent carried the rising inflexion of enquiry as well. Lucinda mildly curious, replied that she had merely been wondering . . .

"Well, I'm wondering, too," Bel countered, eyeing her intently. "Of course you understand that arrangement's not necessarily to be considered binding till you've signed up."

"We shook hands on it," said Lucinda: "I gave Mr. Zinn my word. Why?"

"Oh, nothing; unless what's happened since has had some effect on your attitude, I mean, made your bargain with Zinn seem less desirable. In that case, of course, I'll be glad to use whatever influence I may have with him . . . "

The tensing of her body betrayed the temper in which Lucinda met his suggestion. "What you really mean is:

Have I changed my mind about continuing in pictures, because of this dreadful accident to Lynn?"

Bel's eyes and mouth tightened. "It's not an unnatural supposition, that you may have concluded you've had enough."

"Enough, Bel?"

"Of both . . . "

"That can't be anything but calculated impertinence!"

"Call it what you like. Nothing I could say would convince you to the contrary. Does it matter?"

"Then your suggestion doesn't deserve my notice."

"In that event"—Bel smiled in a knowing fashion difficult to tolerate—"I've got my answer, plain enough: you're bent on going on."

"Have you any objection?"

"If I thought my views had any weight with you I might be tempted to tell you."

"You'd waste your time—if you think I don't know what you'd say."

His brows circumflexed a mocking: "So?"

"You want me to give it up."

"Well"—he stressed a shrug—"one would think you'd seen enough of this sort of thing to satisfy even your curiosity."

"You think I had no other motive?"

"Plus gratification of your vanity—the inevitable factor in every human equation."

"You don't believe my work means anything to me for its own sake?"

"Are you asking me to believe *you* consider this a life worth while? Or that any success it may purchase is worth the sacrifice?"

"What sacrifice, pray?"

"Of the woman you might yet be, if you'd give up this nonsense."

"I think you must mean the woman I might have been before your conduct killed her in me!"

Bel made a wry face as he stooped to pick up his motor-coat. "This conversation is degenerating into a wrangle in which I have the traditional chance a snowball has in the place where motion-pictures were spawned. A husband, even a deserted one, is always in the wrong . . . Mind lending me a hand, Linda? Can't quite manage this with one arm."

At once angrily and gently Lucinda draped the motor-coat over his shoulders. "Generalizing on the hardships of husbands," she suggested sweetly, "is hardly an excuse for making it your specialty to be always in the wrong."

"I feel that, you know." Bel replied with lips that twitched—"feel it like everything . . . I'm to understand, then, my wishes mean nothing to you?"

Lucinda gave a little, silent laugh, and in silence for a moment gazed on Bellamy, her eyes unreadable. Nor was there the hostility he had expected in the tone in which she asked: "Have you any reason to advance, why your wishes should influence me?"

"If you know of none, Linda—no."

"I know of nothing that counterweighs the persecution you've been subjecting me to, ever since you found out where I was hiding from you—persecution that ended last night in a tragedy. I can't forget that, if you hadn't bribed that unfortunate girl to come back——"

"If I hadn't!" Bel interrupted—"and God knows I regret what came of that as bitterly as anybody!—if I hadn't brought Nelly back here, you might still be playing fast and loose with Summerlad's ambition to make you his mistress. Got anything to say to that? You know now, at least, he never intended anything else. And yet, if looks could kill, you'd strike me dead where I stand for having presumed to be as wise in advance as you've been made by the event! And because I made the mistake of trying to stage-manage things so you would presently find out for yourself what a rotter you were throwing your-

self away on, instead of chancing your deeper hatred by telling you outright what every other soul in Hollywood knew—running the risk of seeing you go straight to his arms to prove your indifference to me—because of that error of judgment you'll see me damned before you'll give up a mode of life for which you're about as well fitted as—as I am for that of the Kingdom of Heaven!"

"You forget, what I don't, Bel," Lucinda said slowly, "that it was you who made the mode of life with which I was content impossible for me. If this life I've taken up here is in some sense a makeshift, it's all I've got to take the place of all I had. And now you'd rob me even of it! And one thing more you forget: If I should give in to your wishes and leave Hollywood today, I would only be doing what you say you want to prevent, confessing by flight that my only real interest in my picture work was my greater interest in Lynn Summerlad. For that reason alone—and not, as you believe, to spite you—I've got to and I'm going to go on to the end of this present production at least. After that . . . I don't know . . . "

Discountenanced, "I hadn't thought of that," Bel owned squarely. "You may be right . . . "

"I am; but even if I weren't, it wouldn't be any use your trying to force me to forego my chance at a career in pictures just to get rid of you. Believe me, Bel, it's no good. Give it up, give up this producing blind—I know it's only a blind—and go back where you belong. And leave me to do my best with what I have—with what you've left of my happiness. And remember you have my faithful promise to set you free as soon as the courts will grant me a divorce."

"That's your last word, Linda?"

"My last word to you, Bel—I hope."

He hesitated, the muscles of his face working beneath its day-old stubble; and for a moment, reading truly or mistakenly the look in his eyes, from which

all anger had died out, Lucinda was in deadly fear lest he were on the verge of making one last appeal in another key, one which she was, in that time of emotions, ill-prepared to deal with.

Then flinging out his hand in the salute of the vanquished, Bel bowed and, whirling on a heel, left her—left Lucinda for once at a loss, intuition inextricably hobbled by a mat of doubts.

XLIII

FOR how long she was never quite sure Lucinda remained rooted in that moment, unseeing gaze steadfast to that door whose closing had been synchronous with the opening of another upon her understanding, to let in light, a revelation blinding and arrestive, upon the mirk of her distraction—that failure of self-confidence and determination which had come with realization, for the first time in her history, of inability to read her own heart and mind and guide her steps by such self-knowledge.

Thus posed she was found when Fanny, weary of knocking and getting no response, without more ceremony drifted in, a vision fair of impudent innocence in dainty organdie, the ravages of "oversleeping" perceptible in dim blue stains beneath eyes the more alluring for such underscoring; and with a start and a cry of solicitude perhaps a thought theatrical, convincing enough for all that, dropped parasol and handbag and ran to strain Lucinda tenderly to her bosom of an adolescent.

"You poor, dear darling!" she cooed—"no wonder you sounded so troubled over the telephone—and so sad! I couldn't imagine . . . Why didn't you tell me?"

"How did you hear?" Lucinda evaded, gently extricating herself to disguise distaste for the sickly-sweet fragrance of Fanny's breath. "Who told you?"

"The papers, dearest: haven't you seen them?" Lucinda fell back a step, clasping her hands in sharp dismay: she had never once thought of the newspapers. "Screaming headlines on every page: one would think Lynn, poor dear! was the President of the United States

lying at point of death from an assassin's bullet . . . But what a frightful experience for you!"

"It was a shock," Lucinda assented in a murmur. Without conscious volition she found herself moving away to a window, as if to hide her emotion. "When I heard . . . " In private amazement she heard her voice break; and touching a handkerchief to her lips, said no more.

"Heard! but you were there, weren't you, when it happened?"

Still acting as if in deference to an authority outside herself, Lucinda, without withdrawing her gaze from the street—now basking in the calm gold of the belated sun—deliberately shook her head.

"When I found you and Harry weren't coming," she said—"I mean, when Lynn told me what you had telephoned, I came away. I thought it best, everything considered."

"Oh, how fortunate!"

But there was in that exclamation an undertone of disbelief clear enough to untrusting ears. And of a sudden Lucinda, while continuing to view with astonishment her duplicity, all unpremeditated as it had been, no more regretted it.

"Fortunate?" she breathed. "I don't know . . . perhaps . . . "

Now too thoroughly enmeshed in tissue of involuntary falsehoods to extricate herself without confession, she collected her wits to deal with Fanny's breathlessly vollied questions; and found curious gratification in matching the texture of fact with strand after strand of fabrication, till at length the stuff of lies was woven in with and not to be distinguished from that of the truth. Mixed with which feeling was a sort of dull and angry wonder at herself, that she should be doing something so foreign to her every instinct, lying with such shameless artistry to the one true friend she had saved from the shipwreck

of her old life—and this at the behest of the man who alone had been responsible for that disaster.

She had no more than reached home (she told Fanny) after refusing to stop at the bungalow for dinner alone with Summerlad, when Bel telephoned to tell her what had happened. Suspicious of Nelly's temper for days, Bel, upon her failure to keep a dinner engagement with him, had traced her to Beverly Hills, arriving just too late, if in time to be shot in the arm by Nelly when he tried to prevent her escape.

Determined to see Summerlad—not as yet comprehending the whole truth concerning his relationship to Nelly—Lucinda had instructed her chauffeur to leave her car at the side door of the Hollywood; meaning to drive secretly to Beverly Hills. But this she couldn't do till Bel kept his promise to call and give her all details. It was while they were talking that the car had disappeared. Bel had promptly reported the theft to the police, and that morning had called to tell Lucinda how sharp work had trailed it north along the Coastal Highway to the scene of Nelly's death . . . Accident or suicide, who could say? . . .

At the same time Bel had begged her to make sure of Fanny's silence in respect of the aborted dinner party. It was unnecessary that Lucinda's name should be dragged into the case in any way, if it were she could hardly hope to come through with her incognita intact. She felt that she owed Bel that much consideration; it wasn't his fault she was still his wife. Not that she herself had any wish to court publicity in connection with the affair . . .

"But of course, darling! you know you can depend on me."

"I know; but I had to be sure. You see, you told Mr. Nolan last night I was due at the bungalow for dinner."

"But Cindy!" Fanny's wide eyes were a child's for candour—"that was before I knew there was any reason

. . . Mr. Nolan called up about nine, said he wanted to talk to Harry; and when I told him Harry was away on business (that was a lie—tell you presently) he guessed that Harry had come here to see you, and said he'd try to get in touch with him here. So I told him I believed you were dining out with Lynn; we'd all been invited, but Harry found he couldn't make it, at the last moment, so we begged off. That's how it happened."

"I fancied it was something like that," Lucinda commented, unsuspiciously enough but in a thoughtful tone open to misconstruction by an inquiet conscience.

"But surely you don't doubt my word, Cindy!"

"Why should I, dear?" Lucinda asked, smiling; and pausing in her restless, aimless circling of the room she dropped an affectionate hand on Fanny's shoulder. "What a silly notion!"

Fanny cuddled the hand to her cheek. "Forgive me, dear: I don't know why I said that. I suppose it's because I'm as much upset about my own affairs as you are about yours, Cindy—most of all about this shocking business, of course, and so sorry for you, dear——"

"Don't be sorry for me." Lucinda's fingers tightened on Fanny's. Be glad I've learned a good lesson and had a fortunate escape. I ought to be glad the hurt's no worse . . . "

"Poor darling! you were fearfully fond of Lynn, weren't you?"

"Was I? I've been wondering. In love with Lynn, or just in love with Love: which? I'm afraid the shock of it all is too new for me to be sure as yet, but . . . Oh, I'm sorry for Lynn, of course! but only as one would be for any acquaintance who was in pain and at death's door. But in the light of what I know now, of how Lynn lied to me, and how shamefully he treated that poor creature he married, it seems impossible I could ever have been in love, actually in love with such a man. . . . In love with being loved, yes, I'm afraid I

shall never get better of that weakness; and so absurdly conscious that Lynn Summerlad, the great lover, had chosen me, I never stopped to consider him in comparison with other men. But I don't think I was in love with Lynn. . . . Or am I sincere? is what I'm saying just sophistry to salve my poor, sore vanity?"

She laughed consciously, then in swift variation of mood added a pensive, wistful note: "Fanny: Bel loves me . . . "

The countenance turned up to hers was quick with mirth: Fanny started to speak, gurgled rapturously, and broke down in laughter so infectious that Lucinda could not but respond, if ruefully.

"You great goose! if that's news to you, it's news to no one else."

"It is to me." Lucinda sobered. "Daresay I might have guessed if I'd been a wiser woman, but I wasn't, not till just now, when Bel was going away, after a wretched little squabble. Then something, I'm sure I don't know what . . . "

"I could have told you long ago, sweetest; in fact, I was only awaiting the right moment. I've been sounding Bel out, you may have noticed. There isn't anything one can teach him about flirting, Cindy, all the same there's only one woman in the world Bel can see."

"I'm sure of that," Lucinda agreed . . . "just now."

"Cindy!" Fanny insisted, tugging at her hand—"tell me something—"

"Very well, dear. No: I shan't give Bel another chance. I'm not in love with him at all, and I dare not run the risk of falling in love with him again, I daren't risk going mad with happiness, as I should if what once was could be again . . . and then having to live through all the misery of breaking with him another time."

"But surely—if he promised faithfully——"

"The promises men make to win us, Fanny, are not the

sort that they know how to keep. It's always what they can't have they want most. Give them all they ask today, and tonight they'll lie awake longing for the things they've forsworn. The only woman who could hold Bel to his good behaviour would be one who could keep him guessing. I'm not that woman, I can't pretend, with me it's all or nothing—always!"

"Poor lamb!" Fanny drew her down to sit on the arm of the chair and nestled her frivolous, fair head upon Lucinda's bosom. "You have such desperate troubles, I'm ashamed to tell you my own . . . "

"Your own, Fanny?"

"We're both in the same boat, Cindy," Fanny lamented —"two lorn women this very day as ever was! Harry has left me . . . flat!"

"Fanny!" Lucinda caught the girl's face between tender hands and looked incredulously into its swimming eyes. "You're not joking?"

"Divvle the joke's in me the day," Fanny declared between gulps, dabbling her tears with a handkerchief. "I didn't want to tell you, when you had so much else to worry you, but I'm afraid you've got to know. Because, you see, you're mixed up in it, too."

"I! what do you mean?"

"Well, Harry and I haven't been happy together for ever so long. Love with us you know, was rather a flash in the pan. Last night we had a scene, I mean another scene—forget the serial number. When I went home I found him trying to drink himself to death. He was half out of his head, and wouldn't tell me why. But I had a suspicion and wormed it out of him finally: he's been speculating with the company's money, your money, Cindy; and, now, with Zinn taking over the production, his shortage is sure to be found out. I couldn't make him say how much it was, but there's no question, it will run into a good sum. Well: I promised to intercede with you, and managed to quiet him down and get him to

bed. Next thing I knew he was in the bathroom, trying to cut his throat. Then I hid his razors and let him go back to his whiskey, hoping he'd drink himself asleep. And presently he did. At least, he seemed to. So I went to bed—about three this morning, that was—worn out. When you called up, Cindy, I fibbed to you: I'd been awake about half an hour, howling like a lost child because I knew that Harry had deserted me at last."

"But how did you know—? Did he leave a note?"

"No, dear—that's how I knew. He didn't leave me a note or much of anything else except my clothes; everything that was portable and easy to turn into money he'd taken, all my jewels, everything. So you see, dear"—the face of an unworldly child quivered with a pitifully sad smile—"I'm not only an embezzler's wife, I'm a pauper—and a friendless pauper unless you keep on being my friend!"

The woebegone voice died away in sobs, and with a broken cry of compassion Lucinda gathered that unhappy little body into her arms.

XLIV

THE finding of Nelly's body crushed beneath the wreckage of a motor-car on the beach some fifty miles north of Los Angeles, gave the story of the Summerlad shooting an extended lease of twenty-four hours only on front-page space in the newspapers. In none of these was the ownership of the car called in question; in which circumstance Lucinda thought to detect the influential hand of "Mr. Bellamy Druce of New York," finding further support for this surmise in the fact that even Bel's name came in for astonishingly occasional mention, considering his active part in the aftermath of the affair, and especially considering the civic zeal ordinarily displayed by the local press in playing up the presence in "the Queen City of the Sunny Southland" of personages of social or financial consequence in the East.

Then, since the death of the unhappy woman had defeated all hope of lurid court proceeding, and rendered piquant exploitation of "wild life inside the movie colony" an open invitation to actions for criminal libel as soon as Summerlad got well enough to reckon damages to his reputation, the cause célèbre went into quick eclipse. The newspapers of the third morning carried brief notices inconspicuously placed to the effect that Summerlad was reported out of danger, though his complete recovery promised to be a matter of many weeks, and that the body of his wife was being shipped East to her parents. And the affair was never mentioned more.

Lucinda spent the best part of that day (and a good part of the next two as well) in the projection-room with Zinn and Wallace Day, her new director, sitting in judg-

ment on thirty-six reels of film, the accumulated sum of Nolan's fumbling with about two-thirds of a picture.

Not that such extravagance was anything extraordinary under prevailing methods of production. It remains to this day quite in order for a director to photograph between fifty and sixty-thousand feet of scenes on celluloid, only forty-five hundred feet of which will ever be revealed to the public. The ordinary photoplay, Lucinda learned, runs to not more than six reels, or six-thousand feet of film, approximately one-fourth of which is devoted to reading matter, leaving forty-five hundred feet or less to carry on the story in terms of pictorial action.

The more than seven miles of photography which constituted Nolan's legacy to his successor would consequently require boiling down to about one-twelfth its length to make room for the third of the picture which he had left undirected.

This monumental feat of waste had been achieved by means of photographing every scene, even the simplest, in inordinate length, over and over again, and from every conceivable angle, much of the time with three cameras in simultaneous operation, and by making provision to break up each scene with close-ups of the principal players heaving their chests and mugging intimately at audiences as yet undreaming of their treat in store.

Thus it came to pass that Lucinda, who had at first welcomed the prospect of the seclusion which the projection-room was to afford her, the freedom which those blank black walls would insure from consciousness of fleering eyes and tongues overready to whisper evil concerning her relations with the wounded man—Lucinda, long before a fourth part of the rough footage had been unreeled for her inspection, began to find inexpressibly tiresome the sight of her shadow-self mincing and simpering through endless repetitions of business with which she was already conversant to satiety, and with all her

heart wished herself back again in the uncompromising glare of the Kliegs, where at least, though onlookers might mock and mouth lies, she would have work to do that would help her to forget.

As it was, though her eyes were constant to the screen, her attention was forever flagging, her thoughts harking back along old trails where heartaches haunted . . .

The lively disputes between Zinn and Day which from time to time interrupted the procession of the scenes, as those two debated ways and means to cut and eliminate and avoid retaking, contributed little to the relief of her afflicted spirit. Hourly its burden of boredom grew more nearly insufferable, toleration of it more seemingly insane.

The business as a whole seemed so stupid, so puerile, so hopelessly inconsequential.

Pictures! her very soul sickened at the sound of the word. As if motion-pictures mattered, or whether they were good or bad, inanely done or cleverly. People went to see them anyway, paid money to sit goggling at them, and incomprehensibly dispersed without tearing down the theatres which had taken such cheap advantage of their confidence!

All this bickering about "saving" a production whose asininity one esteemed beyond repair as long as one lacked the moral courage to touch a match to its interminable footage of footless photography!

If it hadn't been for that last quarrel with Bellamy, if it were not for seeming to give in to his wishes and thus giving him more encouragement to tamper with her concerns, Lucinda before the end of that first day in the projection-room would have cried off her agreement with Zinn, abandoned the production then and there, pocketed her loss without murmur, and let the looks of it go hang.

But still the secret springs of vanity were subtly at work. For her own sake, she insisted, for the sake of

her pride, false pride though it might prove in the end, she couldn't draw back at this juncture, she had to go on and, if it were in her so to do, make good her claims to consideration as one who had shown at least a certain promise of value to the screen.

So though she shuddered to contemplate the weeks to come, she steeled heart and soul to see her picture through to the very end.

Young Mr. Day on improved acquaintance appeared to be an amiable and modest person with a fair grasp of the rudiments of his calling; and presently surprised Lucinda by proving himself the "clever kid" that Zinn had asserted he was; immolating himself with the three-dozen reels in the cutting-room for forty-eight hours, at the end of which period he emerged with an eight-reel edition of Nolan's unfinished opus which, when still further abbreviated and publicly shown, ultimately drove its author half-mad with chagrin.

Upon Zinn, however, the effect of this accomplishment was to dispel altogether the gloom in which he had been plunged ever since the attempted assassination of his most profitable star had halted for an indefinite term a costly production within a few days of its completion.

Even Lucinda plucked up heart, began to cherish regenerated hopes . . .

To the weariness of those days wasted in waiting for camera-work to begin again, the visit of Harford Willis came as a welcome interlude, notwithstanding the effort required to show him an undiscouraged countenance and, at the same time, the tale of losses sustained through the mismanagement and knavery of Lontaine.

On the other hand, the gentleman of early vintage knew nothing of the Summerlad chapters; and it did Lucinda good to hear him growl and scold about anything as relatively inconsiderable as the lunacy of throwing money away—"like water!"—and then refusing to set the machinery of the law in motion to apprehend and punish

Lontaine. But nothing he found to say shook her determination not to make an example of the defaulter at the expense of his wife.

"The poor child's been made miserable enough by her marriage," Lucinda declared. "And now Lontaine's deserted her she's got nobody left but her people, who were opposed to Harry from the first and were, I haven't the faintest doubt, to a considerable extent responsible for making her life with him the wretched muddle it turned out. If they'd treated Harry half-way decently, when treating him harshly couldn't change the fact that he was Fanny's husband, if they'd interested themselves to give him a chance to make a comfortable living for himself and her, it's more than likely he would never have dreamed of doing anything wrong. Now his troubles have driven him to it, I'm not going to add to Fanny's by bringing him back to the notice of her family branded a thief. Let things alone and they may make up their differences with her . . . ."

"Such magnanimity is costing you a pretty penny," Willis suggested mildly.

"It isn't anything of the sort," Lucinda pointed out with some heat. "Putting Harry Lontaine in a penitentiary won't put back in my pocketbook one cent of the money he made away with. In fact, to do nothing about him is the only inexpensive way to deal with his affairs. . . .

"Besides," she added with a shy, sly twinkle, "whatever this experience has cost me in money, it's taught me something I would never have learned in any other way, something I badly needed to be taught, too."

"And that is——?" Willis prompted.

"Shan't tell you. I'm not sure I'm quite ready to admit all it's taught me, even to myself."

With this she left Willis to his vain surmises, confident that he would aim the shrewdest of them wide of the mark.

Otherwise, she found irritating the open gratification

with which Willis took note of Bellamy's neighbourhood and drew an easy inference. But he had the wisdom to refrain from mentioning the possibility he foresaw of such propinquity; and Lucinda was generous enough to imitate this reticence and spare Willis the pain of hopes disabused.

He went his way at length not, everything considered, dissatisfied with the way events, as he read them, were shaping social salvation for the young woman in whom he took an interest so genially paternal.

And Lucinda took leave of him with dewy eyes . . . her one true friend. . . .

Now she had nobody left but Fanny; and she was coming daily to repose less faith in Fanny's loyalty.

She was feeling very sorry for herself, and very lonely, and when most in need of friendly companionship—that is to say, when she wasn't busy at the studio—Fanny was seldom at her call. Fanny had given up the bungalow and moved to a residential hotel on the outskirts of the Wiltshire district, whose accommodations she claimed were cheaper than the Hollywood's; pointing out that she hadn't anything now but the wage she earned by playing in Lucinda's picture, which wouldn't last much longer, and that she had to acquaint herself with the uses of economy. Furthermore she knew several picture players who made the Wiltshire hotel their home, and they were nice to her, always asking her out to dinner and the movies, or somewhere. It helped her hold her head up, she said, helped her to carry on.

She employed the slang phrase in its late British sense. Lucinda wondered if the significance of its older American usage were not perhaps more applicable to this instance. The duration of Fanny's love-life with Lontaine had been too brief to keep her faithful to his memory.

Deep in Lucinda's subconsciousness an incidental recollection turned in its sleep. Somewhere, sometime, she had

heard that Barry Nolan had a bungalow down Wiltshire way. Or hadn't she?

At all events, he had: the address listed opposite his name in the telephone directory proved that.

After a time she ceased to suggest the little dinners and drives and minor distractions which would have interfered with Fanny's social commitments. And her loneliness grew more and more wearisome. Times were to come when she would almost have welcomed even the sight of Bel. But then he was away.

A week from the night of their rencontre in Summerlad's bungalow, Bellamy called—first telephoning to ask if he might—to tell Lucinda he was leaving for New York the next morning. Zinn would take charge of his producing interests during his absence. He couldn't say just how long that might be. He had several matters on his mind that he wanted to arrange before returning. If he could be of any service to Lucinda in the East, he would be glad . . .

She thanked him quietly, said there was nothing she could think of.

Bel was glad to state his belief that the Summerlad business had blown over without her name being even privately whispered as in any way involved. He fancied she would hear nothing more of it. If she did, if anything unpleasant happened or threatened, she knew where a telegram would reach him, and upon receipt of it he would drop everything and hurry back.

Lucinda thanked him again, gravely, professing an entire lack of apprehensiveness. If anything did happen, however, she promised not to trouble him; she'd manage somehow to fight her own battles after this; it was high time she learned to do it, who had a lifetime of independent action to look forward to and was unconscious of holding any lien on Bellamy's time or consideration.

"It isn't that," he stammered—"I mean to say, I wish you wouldn't look at it that way. You punished me

more cruelly than you knew; but I deserved it all, and I've no complaint to make and hold no grudge. In fact—the truth is—I've got a lot to be grateful to you for, Linda; you cured me of my two greatest vices, and whatever the future may hold for me one thing is sure: I won't go to smash on account of either wine or women. And so, though I quite understand what your feeling toward me is, and how useless it would be to ask you to forget, I'll always be glad if anything I can do will serve in part payment of my debt. It would make me very happy now if I could go away believing that in any time of trouble you would turn to me as to, at least, a friend."

"I understand, Bel, and I'm most appreciative, but"—Lucinda smiled with a shadow of sadness—"it wouldn't do, what you suggest. I hear what you say, I know what you have in mind, and—it would never do. After what has been, there could be no friendship in true sense between you and me; we're neither of us people whom half-measures would content. And since we are as we are, since with us it must be all or nothing . . . "

She made an end by rising in a manner he couldn't misinterpret.

"It must be nothing?" he implored, holding her hand.

Behind the mask of her composure Lucinda was absurdly agitated and, on that account, a little angry. She refused to admit she had any excuse for feeling upset; she had the upper hand with Bel and meant to hold it, she had nothing imaginable to fear; yet she was horribly afraid he might see . . .

"Good-bye, Bel," she said, with not unkind decision but decision unmistakable for all that. "And good luck. But . . . please never come back." . . .

That night she sobbed herself awake from dreams of dear days dead, and lay for hours hating the cheerless comfort of hotel rooms, missing poignantly the intimacy of her home and the sense of security she had known

nowhere else. Would she ever find such another haven for her drifting soul?

It wasn't that she was in any way hindered from settling down wherever she liked and surrounding herself with possessions. But could any place where love was not be fairly termed a home?

In the morning she rose with a heart as heavy as any she had ever known to address herself to the daily grind—to term which deadly were but to cheapen the detrition of morale resulting from its wear upon the soul.

Yet she had to be fair, she couldn't pretend she had any right to whimper; she was having her own way, getting precisely what she had all along been asking for; and viewed at a purely material angle, her affairs were as prosperous as heart could wish. The new director was living up to and even beyond all Zinn's claims, his revision of the continuity for the sequences remaining to be taken had been as adept as his editing of those thirty-six reels of pictorial farrago, and he was handling the crowded scenes on the supper-club set and the more intimate dramatic passages staged in the living-room with equal competence and the ease of one conscious of but not self-conscious about thorough mastery of his craft.

In this new association the low spirits lifted which latterly had oppressed the mercureal cameraman; Iturbide chirked up amazingly and made it plain that he looked upon Mr. Day as a man, a brother, and an artistic peer.

Between Wallace Day and Lucinda there was no friction, and under his sympathetic guidance she felt she was doing better work than she had ever hoped to do.

Only Zinn, though he observed with every indication of pleased approval the rapid strides the production was making, was known to wag a head weighted with foreboding and utter dismal croaks.

"He's a wonder," he said one day to Lucinda, while they stood aside watching Day rehearse a scene in which she happened to have no part—"a holy wonder and no

kidding. Every so often in the fillum business a miracle man happens like that. But they never last. It can't be done. Stands to reason. What chanst they got? If women don't get 'em the big-head does, and if they happen to get by with both them drags they run into studio jealousy waiting round the corner with a blackjack. What's that the feller says about self-preservation being the first law of nature? Well, if you don't believe he spoke a mouthful, you want to watch what he said work out in the picture business. Any time they see a bird coming along that's got something on the rest of the gang, they just naturally knock him on the head and save their jobs."

But neither the promising status of the picture nor her growing confidence that, when it was put on public exhibition, her work would justify her pretensions, could revivify the old élan. The novelty had worn too thin, its excitation had lost all potency. Day after day Lucinda went to her work without enthusiasm, and if she left the studio of an evening with reluctance it was solely because of the desolation long drawn-out that she must somehow live through ere she could look for sleep to bestow a little, brief oblivion.

And even the hours spent in make-up knew too many pauses, too long delays spaced her appearances before the camera, when Lucinda must needs stand idly by while Day drilled others in their business, or else sit solitary in her dressing-room, waiting to be called, with mind unemployed but for painful introspection and the ceaseless cark of longing for old delights forever forfeit; till discontent frayed out endurance and she learned to loathe every facet of this life whose whole had once seemed so enthralling: smell of grease-paint warmed by human flesh, smell of distemper drying on newly builded sets the hot smell of dust that scurrying feet kicked up on the lot, the pungent smell of sensitized celluloid; moaning orchestras without whose strains no true artistic temperament could reasonably be expected to function at the peak

of its capacity, sizzling of arcs, the magnified howls that issued from directorial megaphones, of argument and exposition, instruction and command, encouragement, expostulation, denunciation, rage; clock-work ticking of camera mechanisms, distant drumfire of automobile exhausts in the parking yard, the hammering and banging without which property men and carpenters never are known to materialize, the unending drone of babble, like the thick rumour of an off-stage mob, as actors strolled and schooled and talked about themselves; the restless phantasmagoria of painted faces, dusted with yellow powder, beaded with sweat, inhuman enough in God's sunlight and in the blue-green glare of the Cooper-Hewitts sicklied over with a livid cast of dissolution, as they were dead walking; suffocating heat of still air boxed in beneath the glass-roofed stages when the sun was strong, drifts of chill across the lot when evening shades closed in . . .

And as in the studio, so was it when her occupation took Lucinda abroad. Many of the scenes which had been adjudged to need retaking were those staged in natural settings—"location stuff." These Wallace Day put off till he had finished with the supper-club and living-room. Thereafter Lucinda had for some ten days to face the camera in the open air. Nor was she often able to arrive at the designated spots except by rising early and taking long motor rides alone, which she came to hold in an aversion scarcely second to that which she entertained for her nightly welcome by that emptiness which in her rooms made its abode. In her seeing the groomed beauties of the lowlands had lost all grace, she saw them trivial . . . blurs of viridescent tarnish mottling a blasted waste . . . cracked enamel on the face of a senile courtesan failing to cover its wrinkles and blotches . . . From which her eyes, revolted, turned ever with a sense of terror to the inland ramparts of bare, seamed hills that, with haggard heads stencilled in raw ochre against the blue, looked down upon the pleasure-lands like

a herd of couchant monsters bound by some old enchantment for a time to make no move, but biding their day, a day whose secret was hearsed in their rocky hearts, when the spell upon them would be lifted and, rising up, they would march shoulder to shoulder down to the sea, annihilating all things in their way, all puny things that lived and toiled and loved under that remote and hollow canopy of sky, in that fixed and brazen grin of sun . . .

They brimmed her moods with a disquietude formless and irrational, those everlasting hills, yet she could never keep from dwelling on them, whose heart was ever yearning over them and beyond, into the unknown and unguessable tomorrows they walled away, that occult destiny toward which she must turn her face as soon as her work here was done.

She counted hourly the tale of the days between . . .

The hole left in her life by the casting out of Bel ached now incessantly and ever more intolerably, since she might no longer drug her mind with that infatuation whose strength had departed. And she knew times whose pain was such that almost she repented having lost capacity for surrender to the anodynous action of that strange phase of love which had so nearly delivered her to Lynn.

Today she called it strange . . .

Twice she heard from Summerlad: on the day following Bellamy's departure, a pencilled scrawl, informing her that he was now permitted to receive callers and protesting his impatience for the visit which he knew her charity would not permit her to deny him; and four days later another letter and a longer, bringing proof of steady improvement in less infirm penmanship and phrases turned more carefully, repeating all the first had said and calling attention to the venerable saw about the ill wind; on the writer's side at least every impediment to their marriage had been abolished . . .

In the upshot Lucinda acknowledged receipt of neither, but for two mornings her waste-basket, with its deep

drifts of note-paper minutely scrapped, bore witness to her endeavors to frame a reply at once final and not too cruel.

Better (she decided) send no word at all than a letter which could only hurt his pride . . . *if* Lynn still believed he loved her . . . if he had ever! . . .

The talk of the studio kept her advised concerning the good progress of his convalescence. She knew no doubt at all but that he would as speedily get well of his disappointment in her.

For her part, the thing was dead and done and finished and as something that had never been; the only wonder was, it ever had . . .

One evening, as she was leaving the studio, she met Wallace Day on the steps of the administration building, and learned from him that, making fair allowance for every imaginable delay, he counted on making an end to camera-work in two days more.

Accordingly, instead of going directly home to the Hollywood, Lucinda motored to Los Angeles and booked reservations for Reno by the night train of the second day following, a slow train but the first that she could feel sure of catching.

She had meant to keep her purpose secret, holding it of no consequence to anybody but herself what she might elect to do, once her work was finished, and bearing in mind the possibility that, if news of her intention should by any chance leak out at the studio, it would find its way to the ears of Summerlad. She understood that he was now far enough forward on the road to recovery to spend part of each day in an invalid chair, and thought it wise to run no risk of finding out that his improvement had been understated.

Conscience nevertheless reproached her when she thought of Fanny, and on the way back to the Hollywood she instructed her chauffeur to make a détour and stop at Fanny's hotel.

If Fanny had no prior engagement, they might have one last evening together. But she would hold back her news till the moment came to say good-bye . . .

Drawing near the hotel, she recognized the conspicuously ornamental car of Barry Nolan waiting at the carriage-block, and as she bent forward to tell her chauffeur not to stop, she had changed her mind, she saw Fanny come out of the entrance, Nolan ambling, with an air of contented habit, at her elbow.

At the same time Fanny caught sight of Lucinda, pulled up short in confusion, then smiled brightly and waved a hand, while Nolan rather blankly fingered the visor of his cap. And Lucinda nodded, smiled in turn, and passed, wondering if the deep colour she had remarked in Fanny's cheek had been merely the sunset's mordant comment on an artful glow of pink.

Well: that was that . . .

Yet it was long before the picture faded of that girlish figure, posed prettily in startlement, brief skirts whipped about it by the evening wind, with its gay look of mirth, half shame-faced, half-impudent, wholly charming . . . sweet grist for the mills whose grinding knows no rest.

The pity of it! . . . Or was it? Had one the right to say? The mills of Mammon grind ever but free will alone keeps the hoppers filled. The choice had been with Fanny, she had chosen in conformance with the dictates of predisposition.

And who could say she hadn't chosen wisely, who had every gift that makes for swift and prosperous progress along the road she had preferred to go?—beauty and wit, ready adaptability, and that highly developed sense of self which often enables the worst of women to travel far and thriftily. Idle to waste time deploring that she had seen fit to throw herself away on Nolan: she hadn't, Nolan, though he might never know it, was but a stepping-stone, a single link in a chain that led to a far shore whose sands were dust of gold . . .

XLV

WHEN she had bribed her maid to observe discretion concerning her plans, and had herself attended to the business of checking her trunks through to Reno, thus keeping her destination secret even from the woman, Lucinda felt fairly confident of getting away unhindered and unpursued.

In the middle of the afternoon, finding she was to be detained at the studio till the last moment, Lucinda telephoned the maid to take her hand-luggage to the station and have it put in her drawing-room. She caught the train with little to spare, and not until it was in motion did she discover the box of roses in the luggage-rack overhead.

Her favorites, Hadleys, two dozen suavely moulded blooms of deepest crimson, exquisitely fresh and fragrant; roses such as Bel had been accustomed to send her daily, once upon a time . . how long ago! . . .

Eyes cloudy with the dreams of yesterday their breath inspired, Lucinda sat a long time with the open box upon her lap.

An age since any one had sent her flowers . . .

The box bore the name of a city florist, but was untagged and contained no card to identify the donor.

From Summerlad, by any chance? Lucinda didn't think so. If Lynn had thought it worth his while to try to win her back with roses, he wouldn't have waited so long, and he would never have neglected to enclose a card or a note.

No: that chapter was closed, and Lynn must surely know how wasted would be his every effort to reopen it.

In the end Lucinda concluded that the maid had bought the flowers for her, as a gift of gratitude. Wildly fanciful as this hypothesis might appear, there had in this instance been unusual provocation, Lucinda in all her dealings with the woman had been more than generous.

And, after all, flowers were plentiful in Los Angeles and among the few things reasonably priced.

Arranged in the metal catch-alls in the corners of the drawing-room, stems bedded in wet tissue-paper, they made a brave show through the evening, and proved rare company, too, trembling with eagerness to salute Lucinda with lovely, friendly nods, and drenching the dead atmosphere with a witching sweetness that called up memories like gentle ghosts.

Their rich yet subtle perfume saturated her mood and coloured every thought as she lay wakeful in the dark, watching the ghastly panorama of the Cajon Pass, basking in unearthly moonlight, unfold like a march upon the hitherside of Hell, and, later on, the vast, still ranges of the desert, where tortured cacti entreated Heaven with frozen gestures of torment and terror, while from afar the goblin hills looked on in dark, sphinxlike disdain.

Here, linking widely spaced oases, where the pepper-tree and eucalyptus shadowed roofs of ribbed iron, and the pineapple palm posed its graceful fronds against the ungainly bulks of water-tanks on stilts, dim trails ran with the tracks, and ever and again panting and bouncing flivvers would spring up out of the night to race the train for a mile or so, or, less frequently, cars more powerful would overtake and distance it as it laboured up-grade; shapes of solid shadow hurtling through the night as if breaking their hearts in hopeless efforts to overtake the fugitive fans of light thrown out by their lamps . . . as men pursue hope through life . . . as women pursue love . . .

And Lucinda, watching, wondered at life's strangeness and its sadness, and marvelled at the mettle men are made

of to sustain them through the race, though they know the end is ever failure, heartbreak, death.

The scent of roses numbed mind and senses: pain and opiate in one . . .

And it was as if she had slept not at all, save that she felt rested; as if she had closed her eyes on darkness and unclosed them an instant later to find the very scene she had been gazing on bathed in hot splendor of sunlight, warm with colour. Still the desert stretched its flats of sand and alkali, sage and cactus, to a far, notched rim of hills, still the train drudged stoutly on an up-grade, buffeting the hushed air with stentorian gasps; still upon the trail beside the tracks raced the motor-car Lucinda had been watching when sleep claimed her . . .

Another car, of course. Nevertheless the coincidence was surprising.

She lay for a little lazily watching it; a powerful, spirited piece of machinery, well-driven, breasting gallantly that long ascent about which the train was making such great ado; drawing abeam, forging ahead, flirting derisively a tail of dust as it vanished from the field commanded by the window. . . . Bound whither? upon what urgency of life or death? that it must make such frantic haste in the heat of the desert sun! . . .

Heat was already beginning to make the tiny drawing-room resemble a cubicle in Tophet. Lucinda rose, ransacked her luggage for her flimsiest garments, gave her flesh the sketchy sponging which was all that facilities permitted, dressed, and rang for the porter and a waiter from the dining-car. While her room was being tidied up she ordered breakfast. Before it could be served the porter turned the drawing-room over to her again.

She waited by the window, looking out upon without seeing the few rude buildings that composed a tank town at which the train had made a halt for water. After that brief respite from the scent of roses she was finding reintroduction to its influence overpowering. It took her by

the throat and subjugated her, reducing her to a most miserable estate of nostalgic longing. . . .

The waiter was knocking. She started up, hastily dried her eyes, pronounced a tremulous "Come in!"

Bel entered, shut the door, dropped upon the red plush seat a duster and cap caked with desert alkali, and stood apprehensive of his welcome, his heart in his eyes.

She fell back to the partition, breathing his name, her whole body vibrating like a smitten lute-string.

In a choking voice he cried: "Linda! for God's sake listen to me. I've been up all night, driving against time to overtake you and beg you to listen to this last appeal. I want you to promise me not to go to Reno. Not yet, at least. Give me a little more time, a little chance to prove to you that you're the only woman in the world for me, that I'm living the life you'd want your husband to live, and have been ever since you left me. Because I want you back, because I'm lost without you, because I want to make you happy . . . as you were happy when you first loved me, long ago . . . ."

She lifted shaking hands to him, cried his name again, swayed blindly into his arms.

"Take me back, Bel," she whispered. "Make me happy . . . Be kind to me, Bel, be fair . . . ."

THE END

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